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# MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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## THE TAKERS OF THE HEADS

by FRANCIS K. ALLAN



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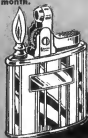
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NEXT ISSUE OUT MAY 4th!

Volume 38

April, 1949

Number 2

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**WINGED  
TERROR**

By

**JOSEPH W. QUINN**

*How could Captain Morgan hope to vanquish the strange monster, with his blows landing — on air?*

WHEN ghosts come to haunt a house or a room, do they always appear in the misty shroud-like form of their once-living selves? Is it possible that in the spirit world there can be a transmutation of the spirit that lived on earth as a human into the spirit form of an animal or a bird? Consider what happened to Captain Morgan, a soldier of the highest honor whose word was no more to be doubted than the rise of the sun.

It was the middle of the nineteenth century. Captain Morgan had arrived in London with a traveling companion. In their search for suitable lodgings he and his friend were recommended to a large, imposing house in a fine residential section.

While the exterior pleased him greatly, the appearance of the room to which he was shown pleased him many times more. It was a large room, well furnished.

There were heavy drapes on the windows and on the walls. There was a large four-poster bed whose snug depths seemed to extend beckoning arms to his tired body. Across from the bed stood a large, richly embroidered sofa.

Captain Morgan's companion was shown to another room, and that night,

*(Continued on page 108)*



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# The Takers of the Heads

Thrilling  
Novel  
of  
Gotham  
Head-Hunters

## CHAPTER ONE

Pagan Micky

**J**IM KIRKLAND was doing crime features for the *Bulletin*, and the editor was this no-laugh, no-speak, no-happy guy named Carl Ward. Ward could count his friends on one thumb, mainly.

Then came this February night, about ten o'clock and seven degrees above zero, when word came to Ward that Pagan Micky's body had been found down in this dive called Tony's Port, a dirty four-story place that called itself a hotel. It wasn't far from the docks along the Hudson, or from Zuto's dope den, from anything else you were hunting, if it was trouble.

So Ward got Jim out of his slippers and off the couch, and sent him down. Nine

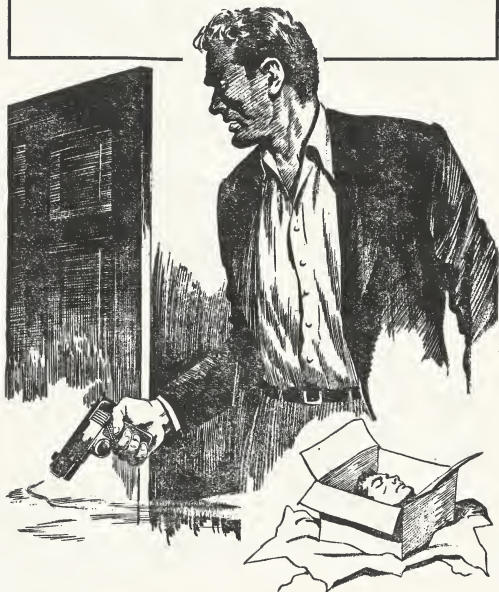


"You look tired," she murmured. "Close your eyes, Jim, and go to sleep. Tell me about it."



By FRANCIS K. ALLAN

*Those strange grey eyes, with their X-ray lights, led Jim Kirkland on a macabre, bloody journey . . . with headless corpses for milestones, and his own grave for a destination. . . .*



reporters were already there in the barn-like lobby, all of them arguing with cops who wouldn't tell which tooth hurt, if one did. Then more reporters came, more cops, and finally Inspector Doolan, looking like an owl with a stomach ache. As even a blind man could see, they didn't find bodies like Pagan Micky's every Tuesday evening. The thing about Micky was glamor. Big, deadily, raw glamor.

Nobody could remember where he'd picked up the 'Pagan', or what his last name actually was. He was maybe fifty, and weighed two-fifty. He had hands like a catcher's mitt, a big face with an ivory smile, plenty of easy talk and jokes, and a way with girls. He lived in a Fifth Avenue penthouse and his legitimate front was the Pagan Club on Seventh Avenue near Times Square. But he was the guy you saw if you had in mind a new angle. Sometimes people had to see him for other reasons. That's where the phrase got started, 'He's on his way to Micky,' which around Broadway mean that a guy might not be alive so long.

There had been Pauli, the numbers guy: He'd put on his hat and told his wife he'd be back early, he just had to see Micky. He was never seen again. Kriswell, back in Prohibition, had told his boys the same thing. Nobody knows yet. There were maybe six others. Over to see Micky, and on into oblivion. Curtain.

It made for a legend of a sort. And through the years, Pagan Micky had gone on smiling his ivory smile, loving his lovely girls, spending more than all the people in the next room put together, and being so smart that not even his barber knew where he got his haircuts.

NOW he was somewhere upstairs in this eighth-rate bin called Tony's Port, and they said he was dead. Jim kept wondering about it. First, because Micky wasn't the kind of a guy to let himself get killed, and second, even should

he do the first, it wouldn't be in a low-class basket like this.

Then Sergeant Graber came down the stairs, and after a lot of pushing and yelling Jim got a quiet word with him out at the prowler car.

"Only for you would I do this, and I'm dead from upstairs if you tell where you got it," Graber said, "but the corpse is Pagan Micky's, all right. The manager, Dossey, found it in a broom closet on the third floor, and he swears he never saw Micky before. Of course, under conditions he could be mistaken and not know it."

"What conditions?" Jim asked.

Graber looked both ways and behind him, then leaned over. "Micky's head is gone. Gone—nowhere around."

"Wait just a minute," Jim said. "His head is gone? You can't find it?"

Graber nodded. Jim wet his lips. "And what other little details?"

"That's about all. He looks to've been dead maybe twenty-four hours, making the job last night. Nobody around here says they know him, but they don't admit it's winter, either. Screwy place. People in there that'd make a crazy ward look like a thinker's convention. I've got to go. Forget where you heard this. The inspector is all upset about Micky's head, see?"

Jim stood there, blowing his breath into the night. He was a lean guy, thirty, with a wind-blown face. In fact, he was so much like what the movies think of as a reporter that most people took him for a losing bookie, or maybe a playboy needing a press-and-shine.

He turned around and looked at the other reporters, who appeared to be doing a polka around the cops in the lobby. Then—just then—he saw a girl come out of the lobby. She had her coat collar rolled up. He couldn't see her face or figure, but for one moment in the darkness he saw her eyes. They were like the touch of warm fingers on him. Then she

was gone, but the touch remained. He shook himself and whistled softly. "Love-ly, lovely."

He took a cab to the Blue Dart Hotel, just off Washington Square. There he phoned Millie's suite. It is from knowing people like Millie Shawness that good reporters get better.

Millie was glad to see him. Where had he been? Bourbon or Scotch or which? And the guy over by the window was Freddie. Ole Freddie, damned if he didn't make corsets. Like a joke. Laugh, Freddie!

"Freddie laughed until his neck shook. Then he quit and took another drink and decided he'd better glare at Jim.

"Put your vest back on," Jim said. "I came to get gossip, strictly."

"Oh," Freddie said. Millie threw some water in a glass of whiskey and brought it back to Jim. She was tall, with bright, golden eyes, golden hair, and somewhat more curves than most. Sometime before she'd met Micky she'd done a stretch of singing somewhere. She was smart.

"Nice place," Jim said. "You're looking nice, too. When did you last see the big guy," he fed in shortly. Momentarily her eyes widened.

"Yeah. I like the windows. You can see the arch from here. Not in a month, anyway. Something froze. There's the arch, see? Is anything wrong?"

"That's a matter of opinion. He's dead. Yeah, pretty view."

Millie made a soft sound in her throat, and then she was still. Jim walked back to the whiskey and helped himself. In half a minute Millie was all right. She adjusted the drapes at the window and smoothed her hair and looked straight at Jim and frowned a certain way. He nodded and emptied his glass.

"Thanks, Millie. I just remembered I'd forgotten you." He grinned at Freddie from the door. "It's all right, son."

Millie leaned against the door. "A gal

took him over. I'll tell you," she whispered. She smiled. "'Bye, Jim. It'll take an hour to ease him," she whispered again.

"Come by the Benton and we'll have a drink." He closed the door and went down in the elevator. He decided to spend the hour taking public-opinion at Micky's Pagan Club. He was too late.

WHEN the cab turned into Forty-eighth Street, the cop stopped it. Fire engines were sitting around like fat ducks in the evening, and the sky had that certain smear of crimson that doesn't come from neon signs. It came from the Pagan Club. Or, more precisely, it came from what was left of the Pagan Club. The fire was down to the pipes and radiators now.

Jim stood there, rattling coins in his pocket, and shook his head slowly. "It's been a discouraging night for Micky," he mused.

He rode over to the Benton, a non-luxury hotel on East Thirty-second where he lived, and sat down in the four-stool cocktail bar to wait for Millie. Over a whiskey he got to thinking of Micky, a guy who'd passed millions of dollars in and out and put things of lace and gold on darlings all around, and when the dance was over, it had been in a broom closet down by the Hudson.

Jim shrugged. He didn't greatly care. It was hard to figure what Jim did care about, if anything. He'd tell you he liked to sleep.

After a while he realized it was almost two o'clock and Millie was late. He waited another ten minutes, then phoned her. There was no answer. Maybe she was on the way.

The bar closed, and he waited around the lobby until three. Again he phoned, this time leaving a message for her to call him. He also left word at the Benton desk in case she came. Then he went upstairs. Sleet had started and it clicked

against the window. Now and then the elevator rattled in its shaft. He listened. He walked around. He got to wishing the sleet would stop, and then it came over him that he was nervous.

He couldn't put his finger on it, precisely. Millie's stand-up, maybe. But something else, too. It was a restless feeling that began building up inside him. He tried to take it apart and understand. He stood still, and a strange sensation came over him. A sensation of eyes.

Suddenly this fragment of memory or delusion—he knew not which—came over him, and it seemed that somewhere—he knew not where—he had glimpsed for an instant the most beautifully soft grey eyes in creation. They had gazed on him in their loveliness and yearning; now they were gone, and he could not remember where, whose, when. Nothing.

Then the sensation was gone, leaving him with a foolish feeling. He didn't like himself. Somehow the room and furniture seemed altered—small, colorless, barren after the memory of the eyes.

He sat down and rubbed his hand across his temples. He felt different, somehow. He got up and looked in the mirror, but nothing had changed, of course. Then suddenly he realized that he had never phoned Ward at the *Bulletin*. He had done absolutely nothing about reporting Micky's death. He was stunned. It was as incredible as walking out into the street without clothes. But the thing that amazed him even more was the slow-dawning realization that he didn't give a damn.

Slowly he stared into the mirror again. "I'm a reporter. I hate bad reporters. I hate people who see big shadows when they're drinking. I *did* hate those things. Now I don't give a damn. What has happened to me?" He leaned closer to the glass. "What's happened, damn you?"

His loud words bounced back off the glass and wall. He stood there, mouth

open, and for a long moment, he was afraid. He didn't know why. He didn't know what he feared. He was simply afraid.

Slowly he sat down and began to rub his temples again. Then he remembered the lovely grey eyes. He sat there remembering, and he began to smile, queerly, to breathe softly, and he didn't give a damn.

WHEN he awoke the next morning, he was still on the couch where he had fallen asleep. It took minutes to arrange his mind. His head ached a little, and a desolate feeling filled his chest. He wondered what he would say to Ward, how he could explain. He knew he couldn't.

He called Millie again before he left; there was no answer. At the *Bulletin* he took a long breath and went in to face Ward. Ward wasn't there. Barnes, his assistant, took a few practice swings:

"The fanciest killing since the Indians left town, and where were you?" he yelled. "Where is your story?"

"Where is Ward?" Jim asked stonily.

"Out with everybody else, covering Pagan Micky's murder. Or had you been informed, Mr. Kirkland?" He lowered his voice to soft sarcasm: "There was a death last evening. A local celebrity, one of our better-heeled gentlemen, lost his head. I do not mean he got confused. I mean—"

Jim hear the smack of flesh hitting flesh. He saw Barnes' thin head snap back, and then he realized that he had slapped Barnes. Dismay passed into shame. He swallowed and stammered, "I'm sorry. . . as hell, Barnes. I didn't mean to. I didn't know until—until I saw it. Something's the matter with me."

Barnes simply stared at him. Jim turned and walked out, down the stairs, and out upon the ice-coated sidewalk. He stood there without any idea where to go. Finally he got in a cab and rode down to the Blue Dart Hotel. Two dollars and a

story about being a cousin from Toledo got the elevator boy to unlock Millie's suite.

The whiskey bottle were on the table.

There was a half-bowl of water where the ice had been. A stale odor of cigarette smoke floated around in the silence. Deliberately he crossed the room and opened the bedroom door. The bed was smooth; it had not been slept in, apparently. Beyond was the open door into the bath. Nothing there.

"Just a few drinks and . . . gone," Jim mused. "But Freddie and his corsets didn't look like a guy Millie would take a quick trip with." He stopped and frowned. "Funny, come to think about it: He didn't look like a guy who had much interest in corsets."

He went back and talked to the elevator boy. "Who is the fat boy with the thick glasses and soft chin who's been seeing my cousin?"

The kid gave him a slanted look. "Why don't you wash that cousin stuff?" Jim sighed and took out two more dollars. The kid grinned. "The guy is Frederick Barker. Big green Packard sedan. Plenty of lettuce. Are you getting discouraged yet?"

"Not yet, my child. Tell me this: When and how did he leave last night?"

"Dunno. Chick was working the night shift. But could be I'd call Chick, if it's something you'd like to hear." He gave another eye toward Jim's pocket.

"You call Chick when you get time. I'll come back. Then we'll look in my pocket," Jim said.

"I'll just call him now." The kid did and came back. "They never left, says Chick, and he says he knows."

Slowly Jim's brows went up. So they came down the stairs, he thought. And that wasn't the way Millie would ever do things. . . .

Suddenly he decided to go back upstairs.

In the top-left drawer of the dresser he found what he wanted—a little ten-

cent memo and address book, stuck under some silken things. Micky's phone and name was there. Somebody's called Elsie, and Jeanne, and Ed. And Freddie.

Jim rolled up his overcoat collar and departed with the book.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Lost Memory

AS JIM left the Blue Dart and turned toward Washington Square, snow beginning to fall and the sky was soot-colored. Already it was as dark as late afternoon. It depressed Jim, filling him with a strange melancholy, a loneliness. Then suddenly the sensation hit him again: Eyes . . . the lovely grey eyes . . .

It was so powerful that he stopped and glanced around. He gasped.

Less than six feet from him stood this tall, majestic girl, her black hair bare and catching the snow, her face clear ivory. Hers were the eyes. They were large, luminous. They seemed to have no bottom, to be eternal pools of yearning and of beauty. They were fixed on him gravely, calmly. Then, as he stood there staring, a smile crossed her lips.

"Hello," she said. Her voice was soft, low. "Don't we know each other?"

"I think . . . I can't . . . I don't know," Jim stammered. "I've seen you, seen your eyes somewhere. What is your name?" he asked.

"Dolores. But I can't remember your name, either. Isn't it strange?"

"I'm Jim. Jim Kirkland."

She frowned faintly, and finally shook her head. "I suppose I was wrong. It just seemed . . ." She shrugged and smiled again. "Well, good-bye." She turned and started away.

Abruptly Jim called out, "Wait!" He hurried after her. She turned and the grey eyes seemed to weave a net of mist about him. He was confused, unable to

understand why he'd called to her, unable to think of words.

"Yes?" she wondered. "Didn't you call me?"

"This—listen, you're going to think—where do you live? When can I see you?"

"But why do you want to see me?" she asked.

"I don't know. Don't ask me to explain. I can't. I only know that I must!"

She gazed at his face, then down his arms, down his legs, and slowly back to meet his eyes again. "Where do you live?" He told her. Then she smiled mistily. "Perhaps I will see you. Soon, perhaps. Good-bye."

She left him standing there, his arms dangling, his mouth half open. After a timeless interlude, the reality of the traffic sounds crept back to his consciousness. The cold wind settled under his coat. He trembled violently. For an instant he felt that he was falling, plunging back toward earth from some totally foreign rendezvous where nothing had been real or rational.

"I am going crazy." He spoke it simply, as a child might say, "I'm hungry." He trembled again. He was very cold. He turned and went into a bar. The whiskey seemed to freeze at the bottom of his stomach. He noticed the clock. It was two in the afternoon. Where had the hours gone?

He shook his head roughly. He struggled to pull the framework of habit back around him. He argued with himself silently from the hard core of his old self: I've got to get off this train. Get out of bars until figure this. I've got to go back and work, and work, and work.

He was tired. His legs felt heavy; he seemed to be pulling them behind him like soggy hams. He walked slowly down the hall to his cubicle in the Bulletin building. He took off his coat, pushed back his hat, lit a cigarette, and sat down. Trance-like he stared at the empty roller in his type-

writer. Now, why was he here? It was queer. Hard to remember.

Then Carol came in. Her face was flushed, her brown hair was windblown, and snow was powdered over the cheap fur of her coat. "Well, the roving reporter, and I'm not kidding," she greeted. She pulled off her coat and sat down at the desk that faced his. "Not talking, huh?" He stared at her and she began to frown. "Are you drunk, Jim?"

"I don't think so. No, I'm not drunk."

SHE did a retake on his voice and tilted her head. Carol was pretty. It surprised people, because it didn't have a glamour punch. Her hair was curly and brown; her eyes were brown; her lips were sweet, but not too sweet. She was a good reporter. She could drink with the boys, then she'd help them home. She always had her own money, and used it. Twice Jim had kissed her. The third time, she'd put him away. "You're just a window-shopper, Jim," she'd said. "Okay, you've seen the come-on. That's all there is."

"What's the matter, Jim?" she asked now quietly.

"I don't know." He shook his head again. "I've got to see Ward. I've got to get to work on something." He started up.

"Ward isn't here," she said. "Sit down. I want to look at you."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. He led us, like a safari, down to the Micky case about dawn, gave us assignments, and evaporated. Now, let's talk about you." She got up and came around to sit on his desk. "It's not like I want to get personal. Maybe it's maternal; all women have it. There's something the matter with you. You look foggy. You talk foggy. You act—"

"Shut up." He said it coldly, rawly. Carol blinked. Then it was like the moment when he realized he'd hit Barnes. It



dawned on him as he heard the ugly echo of his words. He swallowed and ran his tongue across his lips. "I'm sorry. You better leave me alone while I . . . think about this."

"Oh. Big, strong, silent stuff," she said quietly. At that point George Bacon came in, also windblown and snow powdered. He took a look at Jim and started to say something. Carol made a motion.

"He's thinking." Something in her eyes warned George. He shrugged.

"I've been up talking to Philip the manager of Micky's club. He says Micky was nuts for the last two weeks. I said impossible. He said the hell with it, he'd been watching. Micky hadn't been around the club more'n four times in the last month, and when he did appear, he just sat down and started looking at the air in front of him and sort of pinching his fists together. When you said something to him, he either didn't hear or blew his top for no reason at all. That was what happened with that blonde named Millie he was seeing."

Jim raised his head slowly and blinked. "What happened with Millie?" he said fixedly.

"Micky slugged her. Nearly a month ago. They were sitting at a table, eating. Or she was, and he was staring. Philip says Micky just stared at her a little, then took a full swing with his fist. Knocked her out cold as ice. No reason. Then he walked out. They put Millie back together and she left. That was the last they've seen of her."

"Hmm," Carol said. "That's a sweet parting for—" She stopped a moment. "He just sat. Just stared," she began slowly. Her eyes met Jim's.

"The fire that burned the club up is something else," George was adding. "It started up in Micky's office, but the place was locked and nobody had been there since the last time Micky was there, over a week ago." He gave Carol a look. "Who thinks it wasn't spontaneous-combus-

tion?" He paused for a response.

She didn't answer. She was still looking at Jim. Jim wet his lips and started to say something. At that moment somebody began shouting angrily down the hall.

"Ward! Damn it, where is Ward? What kind of a paper am I running?" From the sound of it, the man seemed to be jumping up and down in one place.

"Oh, sweetheart," Carol breathed. "The publisher himself is with us." George reached over and closed the door fast. Carol snapped out the light. Somebody down the hall wasn't so speedy.

"You!" the publisher's voice roared. "Find Ward! I'm going to fire everybody! If I didn't listen to the radio, I wouldn't know the war was over around this place."

"Yes, sir. Oh, true," a frantic little voice said.

"Get down to that Tony Port's! That Shawness woman—that Millie Shawness that Micky was so sweet on once—they've found her in that same place, and by God, her head has been cut off! Get down there!"

"MY FRIEND," Carol breathed, "you heard what the man said. Put on your shoes." She started toward the door, grabbing her coat. George was on her heels. Suddenly Jim crashed his chair down and plunged after them.

By the time they reached Tony's Port, it looked as if a reporter's convention had started on the sidewalk and ended in a riot—still on the sidewalk. Three cops had the entrance blocked. There were four prowling cars and the inspector's wagon. The reporters were surging forward and shaking their pencils at the cops. The cops were shoving them back and shaking their sticks.

"Looks like a lot of work for no yardage gained," George said.

"Let's see what it looks like from the back," Carol said. They went around the

block. Here was a row of worn low buildings—some vacant, some boarded up and decaying, and the rest fighting to stay on their feet. "Let's see this one," Carol suggested. They went into a dirty, garlic-scented tenement. At the back of the murky hall was a window. It faced on a trash-filled alley-court. Ten feet across and slightly to the left was the rear of Tony's Port. There was a door, closed. "But locked?" Carol wondered.

They raised the window, boosted her out, and she tiptoed across. She opened the door, peeped in, then waved them over. They were in a windowless store-room filled with broken beds, chairs, dressers, a stack of beer cases, part of a pool table and some frayed shades.

"I'll try it first," George said, moving toward the inner door. "If I don't come back in twenty minutes, you'll know they've thrown me out." He crept out and closed the door.

"Cozy little place," Carol whispered. "Shoot a game of pool?"

Jim didn't answer. It was too dark in the room to see her, but he reached out and found her shoulder. His fingers moved down her arm. They stopped and clasped her wrist.

"Yes, Jim? What is it?" she asked softly.

He tried to think. Why had he sought her in the darkness? Why was he holding her? There was a reason, but it seemed to be hidden behind some mist in his temples. "I don't know," he began vaguely. "I— You know something, Carol? I could break your wrist right now. You know?"

A moment passed. "Yes, Jim. Of course you could." Another moment passed. His fingers tightened a little. "Are you going to break it, Jim?" she whispered very softly.

"I don't know. I'm trying to think. I— I'm not sure," he said.

"But why do you want to?" she said

calmly. "You're not angry with me. There's no reason. Why should you?"

"I don't know," he said vacantly.

"Let me go, Jim. That's enough. Let me go."

After the longest period, his hand relaxed. Her wrist was gone. His fingers shook. His chest felt hollow and cold.

"It's all right, Jim. I'm not angry," she whispered, as if she were speaking to a confused child. He scarcely heard. He fumbled in the darkness and sank down in a broken chair. It seemed too hard to breathe. His head ached. He wondered why he was here in this dark room. He heard someone speaking to him. He scarcely understood the words:

"It's been almost forty minutes. I'm going to try. You stay here, Jim. I'll come back for you if they'll let me."

After that it was very quiet in the room and Jim closed his eyes. He was terribly sleepy.

HE DREAMED, and the dream scene was of a place of mist—a place where he stood alone, and the mist was a blue and impenetrable wall about him. And yet, all about upon the wall of mist were the grey and lovely eyes that seemed to watch over him, to yearn for him, and yet to seem so sad as they brooded on him. And oh, how he loved the eyes!

Then came the gnawing, restless sound, the scratching and the slight pain. He woke and struck out wildly. A rat leaped from his leg and scurried across the floor. Jim stumbled to his feet and threshed about in the blackness until he flung open the door onto the alley-court. Snow was falling. Cold wind whipped his cheeks. Murky twilight filled the air. A frenzied sensation of having been lost assailed him. A wild need to run, to escape, flooded him. There was no logic, no thought. There was only the frenzy, the memory of the rat, the knowledge that—for one interlude—he had been lost somewhere where men

did not go a strange, misty, lost world of terror.

He ran. He ran until his chest burned and his throat felt scalded.

Then it was gone, as abruptly as it had seized him. He was standing on lower Broadway. Across the street was a building he had seen many times. Buses munched past in the snow. Newsboys called. Lights glowed. He was Jim Kirkland, standing on a New York corner. He was going into the next bar he found and get so damned drunk he couldn't see. Then he was going home to bed. He began to laugh, loudly, then softly. It was very funny, this business of going crazy. Funny as hell!

It was just before midnight when he got out of the cab in front of the Benton Hotel. He was drunk, but not the way he'd wanted to be. This was a cold drunk, with edges like broken glass. It didn't lull; it seemed, on the contrary, to bring sounds more clearly to his ears, to focus his eyes on a thousand details that he'd never noticed before: the pattern of the lobby rug, a crack down the plaster wall, a mole on a man's jaw.

His own movements seemed slow-motion. It made him think of the lazy stories of musicians who took weed and got the sensation of lazy timelessness. And, as in some of their stories, everything seemed easy and possible to him. If he wanted to rise and fly, okay—he could just start floating.

He stopped. Carol was getting up from the straight chair by the elevator. She was looking at him as she came closer. At arm's length she stopped. "Jim," she said softly. "Do you know me, Jim?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course I do. Why not?"

"Where have you been?"

"Getting drunk." He grinned.

"Why did you leave that storeroom?"

"To get drunk." He frowned. "I went to sleep and had a dream, then there was

a rat and I woke up. It was twilight. I went and got drunk."

She came a little closer and looked steadily into his eyes. "Jim, I went back to that storeroom less than thirty minutes after I left you—but long before twilight. You weren't there."

"You're crazy. I was asleep in the chair, I tell you."

"Jim, you were not. You—Jim, we can't talk here. Come on to your room." They went up. Carol turned on the lights in the cluttered living room and watched Jim. She kept away from him.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded coldly. "I said I was there. You say no. You keep staring at me. What do you want?"

"Sit down. I'm trying to put a lot of crazy pieces together, and somebody's got to help me. Listen. I left that storeroom and fooled around in the halls, trying to keep from being seen. Then I heard a big commotion on the floor above me. And guess who it was—Ward. Ward, looking like a fugitive from a grave. He'd been asleep in one of the rooms—or so he said. The police were pushing him around and he was pushing back furiously."

"I don't care. I hate Ward," Jim said.

"Sure. We all do, maybe even his mother, but that's not the point. What was he doing, asleep in that dump?" She paused. "Then I backed off the stairs to keep from getting thrown out, and went back to tell you. No more than thirty minutes. You were gone. I know. I hunted everywhere and damn near ruined my cigarette lighter. About then was when the cop found me. When they found out I was on Ward's paper, they almost had hysterics. First George, then Ward, then me! My God! Maybe they think the *Bulletin* is sponsoring this crime wave for circulation. They gave me such a heave I bounced."

"Okay, so you bounced. I want another drink. I don't give a damn. It's a

new feeling. Nothing matters a damn. You should try—"

"Shut up and listen to me—I'm coming to the hard part. I picked myself up and walked around the block looking in bars and asking if anybody had seen you. And, my misty friend, they had. And remember, it was a hell of a long time before twilight, this I'm talking about."

JIM stared at her. "Who saw me?" he asked slowly.

"The little man at the corner cigar store where you bought the chewing gum. He remembered you mainly because of the big box you were carrying—a big carton box tied with rope."

"No," Jim said grimly. "I haven't carried any box and it's been years since I bought any gum. If I bought it, I'd still have it." He put his hand into his pockets. He came out with a pack of gum. Only one stick was left. He made a sound that wasn't a word, exactly.

"Where did you go? What was in the box and where did you take it?"

Slowly he looked up. "I don't know. I don't remember any of that. I just don't—" The telephone rang. Numbly he crossed the room and picked it up. "Hello?"

Carol watched a smile twist itself across his lips.

"No," he said. "No. Okay, so I work for you. Now I don't. As of now, I quit. You see, I just don't give a damn." He hung up and smiled the same twisted smile at Carol. "The publisher. He screams at me. Ward is missing again. He thinks everything has a connection. Why don't I get to work tracing Ward. I'm going to have a drink, darling. I—"

"Jim, turn around here! Look at me!" she commanded. Her eyes were blazing. "Have you lost your *whole* mind and *all* your ethics? I— Oh, for God's sake, stop leering at me." She came toward him. "I came here to try to understand. First it

was Ward, crooked up at that hole. It doesn't make sense for a starchy guy like Ward. Then you, into a fog and carrying boxes around. What's the matter with you? What's the starting point for you boys?"

She was so close. Her lips were parted, and he remembered the two nights he'd kissed those lips and found them sweet. He grasped her shoulders. He grasped them hard, because he saw the grimace of pain cross her face and she tried to struggle.

"Don't," he whispered. "Remember the times I kissed you?"

"Jim, please," she gasped. "You're hurting me. Please let me—"

"Remember when I held your wrist? I wondered whether to break it."

She ceased struggling. Tears came to her eyes, and she bit her lips.

Slowly he pulled her to him and bent over to kiss her. He kissed her hard; he wanted to hurt. Then he straightened and slowly released her. He smiled the same smile. She felt her way backward, her eyes glistening with fear. She seized the door, jerked it open, and ran.

Jim began to laugh. He laughed until he couldn't breathe. Then he sat down and gasped. A strange feeling came over him. His muscles felt sapped of their strength. His bones seemed hollow. He felt desperately tired, incredibly lonely.

A noise in the hallway startled him and he ran to his desk, going frenziedly through the drawers until he found it—his little .32 automatic. His back was still to the door when he heard her.

"Hello, Jim," a soft and gentle voice said.

Slowly he raised his eyes. Dolores, the girl with the eyes of his dream, was standing in the doorway. She came toward him, looking around the room shyly, then back to him.

"You look tired," she murmured.

Oddly, it seemed not the least strange

that she should be here. It was the most natural thing in the world, and the most wonderful. He nodded. "I am very tired."

"Lie down. I can't stay long. Let me stroke your forehead. Tell me why you're tired. Close your eyes and go to sleep and tell me."

It seemed exactly what he should do. He did.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Missing Box

"TELL ME," she murmured.

"I'm tired because—because I've been carrying boxes, I guess. I didn't know. They told me," he said drowsily.

"Who told you?"

"Carol. The girl who works on the paper with me. A cigar-store man told her. I don't remember."

"You don't remember?" There was a dreamy pause. "You don't remember anything about the boxes?"

He tried to remember, because he wanted to please this girl with the eyes he loved. But he couldn't. He shook his head. "I don't remember the boxes at all."

There was a sigh. "Maybe there weren't any boxes. Maybe they were wrong," she said gently. Her cool, soft hand kept stroking his temples. "You must not believe everything people tell you, Jim. Believe only what you wish to believe, only the things you remember."

"Yes, yes. That's the way. Believe what you wish. Don't give a damn. That's it," he whispered.

"That's it," she agreed so softly. "Only what you wish to believe, and never give a damn. Now, go to sleep. We'll meet again some day."

"You won't leave me?" he said anxiously.

"Not for long, ever."

He smiled and went to sleep.

He woke at exactly eight in the morning. A winter sun was glistening on the snow that was not yet soiled by the city's dirt. The sun made the day seem so simple, somehow. And somehow he knew, without having to think at all, exactly what he planned to do. It was just as though there had been a clock in his mind, awakening him for his tasks at eight. But there was one more point: They were not tasks. Deep within him he knew that this day, prearranged far beyond his control, was to be a day of joy.

He shaved and dressed and went downstairs. He took a cab and gave the address of Ward's apartment building on Madison Avenue. He'd never been in the building; he was surprised at himself for knowing the address. But not really surprised. This was the way the day was supposed to be. . . .

A Chinese butler opened the door. "Tell Mr. Ward that Jim Kirkland is going to see him," Jim said quietly. The butler bowed away. Jim wandered into the long living room, with the windows that glistened with the sun, and the rug that seemed like a sea of mellowed gold. It was a precise, rich, and rigid room. Like Ward, Jim thought.

Still, he'd never stopped to think of Ward's place. And if he had he would have imagined a narrow austere place, without expense. He wondered if Ward were married. Funny. A man like Carl Ward was only a shadow, really. You knew of him as a genius for salvaging bankrupt papers, a cold and polished knife. That was the picture. A man who made a great deal of money. But you never stopped to wonder where or how he spent his money, with whom he lived, whom he loved or whether she was beautiful. You saw him only as a shadow. The shadow of a perfect knife.

He turned as the butler came through a doorway and closed the door behind him. He smiled mechanically. "Sorry

Mr. Ward will not see you today, sir."

"No?" He raised a brow. "Yes." He walked toward the door. The little Chinese babbled a protest. Jim picked him up, moved him three feet to the side, put him down and opened the door.

Across a small library-study, at a leather chair in front of a bare desk, sat Carl Ward. His shoulders were slumping. His head was bent, so that his face was not visible. His arms rested on his knees. He was a thin man with a thin face, thin lips, thin blue eyes, and thin fingers. "Hello," Jim said quietly. At last Ward raised his head and stared at him. His eyes were bloodshot. His cheeks were darkened with stubble.

"Get out of here," he said.

"You look ill," Jim said.

"Get out!"

"Where is the box, Ward?"

The bloodshot eyes grew out of their sockets. The bony throat rippled with a swallow. "The box," Jim repeated. "Don't you remember?"

"What box?" came the thick answer.

"Can't you recall?" How orderly, how prepared the words were. "The box? Tony's Port? It was yesterday, remember? You carried a carton box to a certain place. Where did you take it, Ward?"

As a man might move in a nightmare, Ward gripped the edge of the desk and pulled himself erect. He swayed, sustained his balance, and came stiffly toward Jim. He seized Jim's coat and half clung, half shook.

"Where did I take it? You know! Where, tell me?"

Jim looked at him steadily. Ward was not lying; he did not know. Jim smiled. "I haven't the slightest idea. I—"

"No, no!" Ward screamed. He hung onto Jim's coat. "Answer me! I'm going—going mad! You know! You've got to know! Where did I take—"

Jim moved his arms but kept his grip on Ward's wrists. He looked at them,

then looked at Ward and smiled. "I've hated you since the first day I saw you. Remember? A publicity gag—you sent me out on Christmas Eve to get the saddest story I could find. You paid the poor devil ten bucks to spill his soul to two million subscribers." He looked at the wrists again. "I could break them, you know. Why don't I?"

Ward did not move. He kept staring into Jim's eyes. His lips were loose and damp.

Slowly, contemptuously, Jim shoved him back, and he staggered against the desk. "Maybe there'll be another box to carry soon. If you don't remember."

He laughed, turned, and walked out. Past the butler and into the hall, down the stairs, and out into the wintry and sunlit street. He stopped at the drugstore halfway down the block and entered the telephone booth. His fingers moved on the dial, finding the numbers without thinking.

"It's ten o'clock. I've talked to Carl Ward. He doesn't remember."

"Thank you. Go to sleep. You're tired, Jim."

"Yes." He hung up. He went home, took off his clothes, and went to sleep while the mid-noon sun shone through the windows.

WHEN he awoke, a strange face was above him and a dirty hand was shaking him. "Huh? Uh?" he said thickly.

"Listen, Mr. Kirkland, you said today and the management said today, so if you want these walls painted it's got to be today. We got a schedule." He motioned, then frowned. "Anyway, judging from listening, you ought to be glad I woke you up. Lord, what a nightmare you must of been having!"

Jim rubbed his head and tried to focus his eyes on the clock. It was ten after one. In the door to the living room stood a



mild-faced man in white coveralls with brushes in one hand and a ladder on the other shoulder. "Paint," Jim muttered vaguely.

"Yeah. Don't you remember? You wanted it painted in here where the rain blew that time. Last week we said today. Are you sick?"

Jim shook his head dimly. He got up and went into the living room. From the couch he could hear them setting up the ladder, moving the bed, the chairs, and dresser. He kept rubbing his temples and trying to snatch at reality. He felt as though he had been left in space. He should be asleep. That was it. He had no right to be awake. Everything was wrong. Being awake was wrong.

He cursed wearily. He couldn't understand. It was too hard to try. He wanted a cigarette. He reached for his coat and hunted. His fingers came out with a worn little book. A memo book. Millie's memo book, of course. But Millie was dead. Her head had been cut off. Golden-haired Millie. Dead. Freddie. Here was his number and address.

Freddie had been there that night, and the elevator kid had said he hadn't left. Which meant they'd gone downstairs by the stairway. Then Millie had been found at Tony's Port, dead.

Jim fingered the book. He moved his tongue along the inside of his mouth. Maybe he ought to talk to Freddie. Maybe it was his fault, going there to talk to her while Freddie was there. Maybe that was it.

Jim stood up and reached for his pants.

\* \* \*

It was one of those three-story buildings in Greenwich Village that, unless somebody told you, you'd think should be for rent free. Then you learn about the terrace and such, and next it's four hundred easy, unless with a piano it's five.

This was Freddie's place when the little man with the flour-white face opened the door.

Mr. Barker was not in, said the little man. His eyes were busy roaming over Jim. Was there any message?

It was hard for Jim to keep remembering just why he was here. He stared across the little guy's shoulder and into the long room. It was strictly plush. Everything was in polished pairs. Everything was absolutely where the interior decorator said to put it. Like a show room. Nobody really lived here. That was it: nobody really *lived* here. This was just the front.

"But the front for what?"

"Beg pardon?" the little man said softly.

"Huh? Oh. I was just thinking. I don't know. Where is he? Freddie or Barker. Freddie Barker? Where does he stay when he's not here?" The little guy decided to blink; his eyes were busy again. "Where is the corset factory or whatever it is?" Jim demanded abruptly. The little guy's pale eyes were making him nervous.

"I cannot say immediately, sir," the little guy said. "If you would like to sit down here, I will try to locate Mr. Barker by telephone."

"That's progress. Yeah. You locate him by phone." Jim sat down. He felt now as he had tried to feel the night before when he had gotten cold-drunk, not warm. But even now he felt like a fraud. He wasn't supposed to be here. He was supposed to be asleep. If it hadn't been for the painters . . .

"A cocktail, sir? A highball while I try to locate Mr. Barker?"

Jim nodded finally. "Why not? Bourbon and soda."

The little man went away. Jim heard the ice tinkling gently in the depths of the apartment. His eyes roamed around the room. Too new, too clean. Just like the

day somebody had laid down the cash for it and said to send it down. And the little guy had to phone. . . .

Funny, it was hard to figure even simple things.

"Your pleasure, sir." The little guy held out the tray. Jim took the highball and the napkin.

"Wait just a minute." Jim got up slowly. The little man paused and blinked. "Just for luck," Jim said, "why don't you take the first half of this?"

"Oh, sir," the little man protested. "Really, I couldn't . . ."

"But between us, you're going to. Drink it, little pal."

"Oh, but sir, I thank you." He took the glass and drained it all. "Ah, I *do* thank you. And now, may I mix you one?"

Jim wanted to seize his throat. "Yeah. Straight," he said angrily. The little man scurried away. Jim stared at the door through which he had gone. Suddenly, silently, he stalked after him and pushed open the swinging door into the kitchen. There was the little guy, bent over the sink and retching in horrible agony, his finger in his throat. Jim stood there and let him finish. When he turned, Jim hit him.

It was a long, wound-up right that caught him on the left of the chin-point. It dropped him without a murmur.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Girl With the Grey Eyes

JIM stared at the inert figure and rubbed his knuckles. Slowly he turned and walked into the hall. He pushed open the door into a bedroom. It was just like the living room—precise, polished, unlivable. There was nothing but clothes in the closet, shirts and handkerchiefs neatly folded in the dresser. Nothing in the bathroom. In a small room at the back were a

few bookcases, many of the shelves empty. There was a bare library table, a chrome smoking stand, and a leather chair and telephone. Nothing else.

Jim returned to the living room. Nowhere was there a scrap of personality, of human detail. A feeling of frustration sank through him, mingled with gnawing bewilderment. He tried to remember again: Why had he come here? Why had he slugged the little guy? Nothing mattered a damn. Why couldn't he remember that?

He shook his head listlessly. God, how tired he was, he thought.

He wanted nothing save to get home and go to sleep. Why had he ever left home? He closed the door of the apartment behind him and went slowly down the stairs. The wintry sunlight was lost now. A blue-black sky was sifting snow. A wind was rising, snapping at the skirts and coats of girls, lifting and hurling newspapers up against building walls. The world and everything in it seemed such a strange place. There was no reason for anything—wind or people or anything.

He walked aimlessly until he remembered it was cold and he could take a cab. By the time he reached the Benton Hotel it was semi-dark. Five-thirty. He stared a long time at the clock. Time didn't matter a damn either, he was thinking. First it was one morning or night, the next time you looked, it was something else.

As he walked into the elevator, two bulky, round-faced men stepped in behind him. "Hello, Kirkland," the one with the gold tooth greeted. "I'm Patrick. This is Mason. We're from the police. We'd like to ask you a couple of things."

Jim looked at them vacantly. "Why not?" he said. "I don't give a damn."

One looked at the other. They shrugged. "That's nice" one said wryly. They followed him into his apartment, heavy with the odor of paint. Jim turned

on the light, and the two detectives looked around.

"You knew Millie Shawness, didn't you?" Mason asked.

"Yeah. I'm tired. I don't want to talk."

"We're tired, too. But we want to talk. When did you last see Millie?"

"Yesterday. A couple of days ago. I don't know. I don't care."

"You went up to her place at the Blue Dart Hotel, night before last. She wasn't seen alive after that. Does that help you any?"

Jim stared at them, then at their arms, at their hands. A vague smile came across his face. "You know something? I could break your wrist, probably. Did you ever think of that?"


Mason and Patrick started looking at each other, then Patrick came over and put his chin close to Jim's. "Look. As detectives we are just as gentle as we need to be. Otherwise we aren't. We want to

know what goes. You and Millie and who is the mysterious Freddie Barker? Where does he live? He's not in the book. And—"

"Something else," Mason put in. "What are these boxes that you and Carl Ward have been lugging around in the neighborhood of Tony's Port? And where is Carl Ward?"

"I don't know." Jim stared at them listlessly. "I don't give a damn."

Mason's throat began to swell. He made a choking sound and started across the room. At that moment the telephone rang. After it had rung four times, Patrick jerked it up with a curse. "Hello? What? Oh, no. We just found him. He's standing here giving us the silent stuff; says he don't care. I don't know. . . . What? Where? Yeah, sure." He hung up and motioned to Mason. "A cop spotted Ward down near Wall Street a while ago. Something's funny." He paused at the door.



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"I only wish I could stick around a while," he said to Jim. "Maybe later." Jim sighed. It seemed too bad that he hadn't gotten a chance to break the man's wrist.

He sighed again and sat down. He closed his eyes, and then he remembered her eyes. A feeling of warm certainty passed through him and he smiled with pleasure.

"Are you tired, Jim?" her lovely voice asked. He opened his eyes, and there she was, so beautiful, so yearning. He nodded. "But I wanted you to rest today. You should have slept Jim," she said with the patience of a mother.

"I know. But the painters came and I had to get up. Then . . ."

"Yes? And what then, Jim?" she prompted.

He tried to remember. He wanted to tell her. He wanted to do anything that would please this lovely girl. "I . . . Oh. To Freddie's. I wanted to ask him something. About Millie. That was it. Then I hit his butler because . . . That's strange. I don't know why I hit him. I was so sleepy. Then I came home." He smiled. "I didn't give a damn."

"And what did you say to the men who were here a while ago?"

"The same thing. That I didn't give a damn."

"And nothing about Freddie?" she whispered.

"No." He blinked vaguely. "Do you know Freddie, too?"

She smiled. "In a way I know everyone, Jim." She sat down on the couch and drew his head down into her lap. "Rest now, and go to sleep." She began to stroke his temples. The sweetest of peace came over Jim. He felt himself go floating out beyond the realm of consciousness, up and up, far beyond reality, and into that place where there were only walls of mist and the luminous grey eyes he loved so desperately.

HE WOKE. It was ten o'clock. Night. The night lamp glowed softly. He felt incredibly rested. He was ready. Yes, ready.

He bathed his face, combed his hair, put on his hat and overcoat, then paused at the desk and opened the drawer. He took out the .32 automatic, checked its load. He put it in his pocket, took a last look around, then closed the door. He went down the stairs and out the service door of the hotel. He paused there a few minutes while he studied the forms of people. Most were hurrying toward subways, their heads bowed against the snow and wind. He studied a parked car near the corner. Easily and unobtrusively he moved in the direction of Third Avenue, keeping close to the shadowy walls.

How natural it felt to move this way, he thought. At last he could understand cats; this was their way, wasn't it? With a purpose, too. A bird in a bush, perhaps. But his purpose was waiting . . .

He took the El and rode up to the Seventies. He climbed down. In the gloom and snow beneath the El, he found the drab little bar and grill with a parrot painted on the window. It was a dirty place, dimly lighted, sour scented, with an air of hostility about it. He walked past the bar and to the even darker section where the few booths were located. There, staring at him with gaunt eyes, sat Carl Ward. Jim went over and looked down at this man he hated.

"Did you do it?" he asked.

Ward nodded. There was a veneer of sickness on his thin face. He seemed an eternity older than yesterday. He seemed like a man who had taken his place in the procession that was creeping toward death.

Jim sat down. "Let me see," he said.

Ward handed a small suitcase across the table. Jim opened it. Within were stacks upon stacks of crisp bills.

"How much is it?" Jim asked.

"One hundred and forty-seven thousand, six hundred and eighty dollars," Ward said drearily. "I sold everything I could sell. All I have."

"It's more than I thought you had."

"I've always saved my money," Ward said. "My father left me some when he died. I have tried to invest wisely."

"That's nice." Jim closed the suitcase. "It's time to go."

A look of helpless agony came over Ward's face. His throat struggled. "Let me stay here. I'm afraid to—to go on."

"Maybe that's why you *must* go. If you did not have that little corner of fear, perhaps you could be like I am. You see, Ward, fear means that somewhere, in some corner of your brain, you are trying to think the things that you must not think." He rose. "Come on."

Ward managed to pull himself up. He was like an ancient and feeble man, shaken with palsy that was fear. He clung to Jim and moaned as they walked out of the bar. The bartender and two customers ceased talking to stare at them.

They took a cab, and Jim gave the address that came to his mind. The cab passed Tony's Port and came to a halt near the next intersection.

"Exactly midnight," Jim said, looking at his watch. He opened the door. He had to pull Ward out. The cab vanished at the corner. The snow was a vast white blanket, shaking itself out of blackness. There was not a sign of life in the derelict block. Then, as if out of nowhere, a figure appeared at Jim's side. He was bundled in a long overcoat. His hat was pulled low, and white with snow. His glasses were faintly misted, and his soft chin had a look of hunger.

"I'm sorry I missed you today," he said softly.

"It's okay." Jim smiled at Freddie. "Here's the load."

"One hour. Time to have a drink. I'll meet you here," Freddie said.

Jim nodded. He took a long look at Ward. Ward was staring at him. He stumbled forward and clung to Jim's arm.

"Don't leave me. Please, for God's sake! Don't leave me!"

"Come on," Freddie said. He took Ward's arm and turned him along the walk. Jim watched Ward's turned-back face, with its sunken, hopeless eyes, until the snow became a curtain beyond which the face was lost. For a moment a feeling of vague melancholy passed through him, and he knew that he no longer hated Ward. Perhaps he'd never really hated him; only despised the things Ward couldn't help or change.

He walked back toward the only lighted sign he could see and went into the bar. He drank slowly until five to one, then put on his overcoat again and walked back toward the corner where he had left Freddie.

At one o'clock the bulky shape emerged from the veil of snow. Freddie's thick glasses glistened. He held out the carton box, just larger than a man's hat box.

"To the same place. You remember?" he asked softly.

"Where the blue dolls are dancing in the window."

"Nice. You're smart, Jim." Freddie handed him the box. Jim turned and walked away into the curtain of snow.

He had gone two blocks when the blur of car lights swung inward from behind him. A voice called his name. Doors slammed. He turned. Out of the blur of snow and night appeared Carol's face, then George's.

"Get in the car. Hurry!" Carol ordered.

"Go to hell," he said flatly.

"Sorry, then, mister," George said. He swung. Jim tried to duck. His feet slipped on the frozen snow. George's fist sent him staggering against the building. He came lunging back at George. A third

person materialized out of the snow and a fist sank into his chin. He went down. As he struggled to get free he felt himself being shoved into the sedan.

Drive, Carol, while we try to hold this id. . .

Jim wanted to laugh at them. They thought they were smart. But wait. The hell with them. He began to laugh. Somebody slapped him hard across the teeth.

"Shut up until we get you out of town."

**P**RESENTLY the car stopped. The doors opened. Lights shone. Hands pulled him out. He looked around. There were Carol, George, and Neeley of the sports staff. This was George's garage, on George's place out in Queens. But why in hell had they brought him here?

Then George was cutting the rope that tied the box.

Jim lunged forward: "Stop! That's—"

Neeley tripped him, and he fell on his face. When he got up, Neeley was balancing the handle of a car-jack.

"I like you and I wouldn't want to. But no more jumping, son."

George cut the last knot and ripped away the brown paper. He opened the lid of the box and began to rip out the excelsior. He froze.

"Oh, God," he whispered. Carol looked and made an inarticulate sound. Jim stared and swallowed and ran his tongue across the tips of his teeth.

It was Carl Ward's head, nestled there in the excelsior.

"Old. He looks old, doesn't he," Jim murmured distantly.

Neeley took a firmer grip on the jack-handle. George stared at Jim with glazed eyes. Carol's eyes were closed for the moment.

"Now, pal," Neeley started slowly, "this is where friends have to ask questions. How about this? Tell it straight."

Jim looked at him. "I don't know what

you mean. I don't know anything."

"He means who killed him, Jim!" Carol exploded. "Who? Why? How did you get his head? Did you kill him? Don't stand there! Answer us! Are you completely insane, Jim?"

He frowned at her. Then he smiled. "Remember when I wanted to break your wrist? I can still—"

"Stop that!" she almost screamed. "If you can't be lucid, what—"

She stopped. Her eyes widened as they followed Jim's hand. For Jim had remembered the .32 in his pocket. As his hand started out, Carol cried sharply. George jerked forward, then stiffened. Neeley exhaled a low curse.

"Jim, you're making some lousy mistake, I swear," he said.

"Give me the box," Jim said softly. He dragged it toward him and pushed down the excelsior. He knotted the rope loosely, picked up the box, and backed toward the garage door. The snow swirled about him as he opened the door. He saw their eyes, their white faces. He slammed the door and ran, the box in one hand, the gun in the other. He was laughing.

He found a cab and returned to Manhattan. He left the cab on Broadway, above Columbus Circle, and turned west down a side street that dipped toward the Hudson River. Here the houses all seemed old—massive and gloomily alike, with their large windows, broad stone steps and thick columns. And here was the house of the dancing blue dolls.

Tiny Victorian figures, cut in a silhouette from blue paper. They were placed in the window, and within the room a faint ivory light was glowing. This was the place. He climbed the stairs, entered the dark hall, and opened the inner door.

Dolores rose. She smiled. Her smile faded. "Why is the box open, Jim?"

"Why? Oh. Someone tried to take it away from me. But I had the gun. I didn't let them take it."



"That was right, Jim." She smiled and took the box. Her eyes were rapturous, glowing embers. "Sit down. I'll be back soon. I want to talk to you Jim."

**T**HE MEMORY of her smile haunted him. He felt both drowsy and deeply contented. How simple life was. You merely listened to echoes to whispers that guided you, and there was no need to worry at all.

Dolores returned from the depths of the house and smiled at him again. "I want to ask you some questions, Jim. Answer them if you can. Will you?" she asked, and he nodded almost breathlessly. In that moment he would have done anything she requested, and her face seemed to glow with the pleasure of knowing it.

"First, close your eyes," she said. He did. Her fingers touched his temples. "Now, you are floating away, aren't you? You are happy. You hear my voice, and my voice is the entire meaning of everything, isn't it, Jim?" He tried to answer. He wanted to smile and please her. Yet his muscles were asleep and he was floating. And he heard her laughing; it was a faint and bell-like sound, full of echoes.

"Now," she said, "where are you?"

"I don't care. I don't give a damn," he

whispered. "I don't care where I am."

"What have you done today? Yesterday? What are you doing now?"

"Nothing. I've been happy. That's the only important thing."

"Open your eyes. What is this, Jim?" In her hand she held a small vial and a needle. "Have you ever seen it before?"

He shook his head.

"Does your arm hurt?" she asked. He looked down. His coat and shirt sleeve were pushed to his elbow. It seemed foolish and he smiled.

"Nothing hurts. Nothing matters, does it?" he said.

Slowly she pulled down his sleeves and looked at him a last time. "You are what I have been looking for, Jim." She turned and called softly. The door opened and a stranger came in slowly. He was a thin man, an old man, yet his eyes were curiously bright and eager. His flesh was grey. His hair was grey. He had moist lips, full sensual lips that were incessantly moving, as if they were tasting something that no one else on earth had tasted.

"Here he is, Father," Dolores said. The thin, grey man stared and tasted. He patted moisture from his lip and stared again. "He is stronger than Freddie," Dolores said quietly. "He is smarter.

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And he obeys even more perfectly. I'm tired of Freddie, Father. I want something new."

The old man smiled. "I always want my child to have what she wants, you know." Then he shuffled across the room and touched Jim's hand. "Do you like the touch of my hand?"

Jim stared into the old and bright eyes. "Yes. Oh, yes, yes!"

The man struck a match. "Hold still. This will be a joy." Then he placed the flame against Jim's palm. "Laugh," he whispered. Jim laughed until the tears came to his eyes, and he could not pull his joyous stare from the eyes of Dolores' father. The old man smiled. "Yes, my child," he said to Dolores, "you have made a happy choice." He smiled again. "So now we must make plans for Freddie, of course. Dear, poor, gentle Freddie . . ."

He sat down and took Jim's hand again. "Listen carefully, my son. I want to tell you about a visit you must make, about a gay errand you must run. There is a place called Tony's Port. And across the street is an even more miserable building. Now, Jim, listen carefully to my instructions. . . ."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Head-Hunter

**T**ONY'S PORT was grey in the dawn when Jim passed it and crossed the street. He entered a shabby doorway, climbed two flights of ancient stairs, and stopped before a closed door whose number, 7, was turned upside-down. He knocked softly, then moved the 7 on its one screw. Beneath it was a small round hole and his eye met the moist, hungry eye of Freddie, peering at him from the other side.

"Father sent me," Jim said. "He said to tell you that I am one of the family now. Let me in."

A lock turned and Jim entered a long room that was astonishingly luxurious for the rest of the building. The two windows overlooked the street and Tony's Port. There was a corner bar, a thick rug, a couch and paintings. There was a sweet and musty scent in the room, a rich scent. Freddie locked the door again. His neck was moist with perspiration. His face was flushed and his eyes were enlarged. His spectacles were steamy.

"Father sent this to you," Jim said. "He said you'd be happy to get it. The best he has, he said." He held out a small box, no larger than an aspirin box. Freddie seized it quickly and fumbled it open. He hurried to the bar and poured a half-glass of water. He took one white capsule from the box. Before he swallowed it, he rolled his eyes back, and his entire body seemed to throb. Jim watched him, a sensation of curious repugnance wandering through him. Freddie coughed and laughed. "So you're one of the family now, are you?" he said jovially.

"Yes. Yes, I am," Jim said softly. "Father told me I'd work here with you."

"Well, it isn't the worst life in the world, my boy. Not by a long shot. It has complications, but so does everything else. It takes intelligence, but you have that, I'm sure. The important part is to be inconspicuous. Don't be too well remembered; have a different guise each few weeks. That closet," and he gestured, "is full of rags to wear, crutches to lean on, glasses to stare through, wigs to glue on. And never stay long in the same place. Now this is satisfactory for a while; many of the people down here are derelicts. Homeless, without families. So when they vanish, no one knows or cares."

"Just the same, it is unwise to work the same side of the street too long," he said with a smile. "You'd be surprised, too, how easy it is to find a bargain on Park Avenue. People are always disappearing from Park Avenue." He laughed

softly. "Some wealthy fool eccentric, some drunken playboy, some philandering wife. It happens, and so Park Avenue is a nice shopping place. Ah, but the finest time we ever had was when Father ran the little private sanatorium for alcoholics! You know, not a tenth of those who came wanted anything known about it; often they did not tell those at home. So when they vanished, where had they gone? It was almost impossible to tell. But all good things must end, and even that little holiday . . ." Freddie paused and rubbed his flushed face. "It's too hot in here, isn't it?"

"Take a drink of water," Jim said.

"Yes, I will. I—" He stumbled and held onto a chair with one hand while he clutched his throat. "Burning . . ." he began in a choked voice. He tried to scream. He staggered and reeled. For endless moments he stared glassily at Jim as his hands fought at his throat and his lips strove to speak. "Father . . . He sent . . . poison. . . ." The sentence was never completed. Freddie fell and shuddered on the floor.

Jim watched the spasms of death—watched without any feeling save curiosity and the simple understanding that it didn't matter, so long as he did what Father had said.

\* \* \*

It was mid-morning of the cold sunless day when Jim returned to the house of the dancing blue dolls. Father and Dolores were waiting for him. Father reached out avidly and took the box Jim had brought. His fingers shook as he untied the rope and opened the lid. Then he sighed gently and smiled.

"A lovely job, my son. You have the hands of a surgeon. See?" He held out his hand to Jim. "The long fingers, the strong fingers. You will learn swiftly as I teach you." He gazed into the box

again. "Poor Freddie. His fingers were really too fat. They squeezed. You understand? Fingers should glide. Glide . . ." He replaced the lid of the box and carried it away. He returned with Dolores' coat over his arm. "Drive carefully," he said. "It is ten-thirty. You should be back by four." She nodded.

After she had gone, Father stepped to the window. Jim looked down with him to see Dolores getting into a sedan that was parked in the passage-way between the two buildings. The back seat was stacked with luggage and packages. Then the motor droned and Dolores drove away. Father rubbed his hands together and breathed softly. "At last we are under way," he murmured. "Sit down, Jim. It is time that you and I understand each other, isn't it?"

"Yes. Except . . . I feel that I don't need to understand."

"But you must learn devotion. You must have zeal and fervor for the Work. You must hang breathless on every step of the task!" He leaned forward, looking into Jim's eyes. "It is a dream I've lived for all my life! It is vast! Too vast and strange for simple minds to grasp! Listen to me . . ." He began to speak with a breathless enthusiasm, and his grey face shone.

"I AM a surgeon, Jim, but not one of those plodding aimless toe-trimmers. The world is choking with them. I hate them. They tried to ruin me long ago. All my life they've persecuted me. Driven me. Forced me to hide, change names, change even my own face! Oh, I hate them. But it has never shaken me from my dream. Listen . . . Did you ever think of brains? Brains. There is a brain of some kind in all of us. And then, think again! There are brains in dogs, in monkeys, in elephants, in cats, in countless things. Now! Think of this: Let us take a human brain that can understand

what we say, that can reason, and, most of all, that we can teach to *obey*. Let us put a human brain in the body of a dog, a cat, a horse. Let us teach this man-animal, as we would teach a child in school. Teach it to obey us, only us in the end. Then let us send it out to do our bidding. Can't you visualize?" he cried breathlessly. "Can't you dream? Think!"

His voice grew softer, swifter: "We tell our man-cat to steal the finest necklace in a Fifth Avenue shop. He slips in, seizes it, runs. If he is caught, what has happened? How can the police prosecute a cat? If they kill it, what of it? And our man-cat was taught to reason and obey, but it cannot talk. There are fundamental differences in tongues, you see?"

"I see, I see!"

"Oh, you have only begun to grasp the meaning! Theft is only a tiny chip in the game. Think of a horde of animals at work in this city. An animal attacks the engineer of a train, claws out his eyes. The train is wrecked. Subways are wrecked. Animals go everywhere. Which are the man-animals? No one can tell. Animals can hide. They can disrupt communications; they can spread disease, if properly infected. They can demoralize and shatter this entire city in one fortnight. A reign of man-animal terror, see? Spreading, mounting, building panic and ruin. Jim," he whispered, "it would be possible to control this continent, to make slaves of millions of people. Oh, how I've dreamed. And now . . ." He rose and walked up and down the room.

"The dream is coming true. I have the brains. I have saved them so carefully. I have the money from Pagan Micky and Ward. I have the place. A place on Long Island. Today is the beginning. We will establish a boarding kennel. Dogs and cats will come, entering as dogs and cats; they will go back to their owners as man-dogs, as man-cats. Their owners will be wealthy; we will assure ourselves

of that. They will be taught to drive the owners insane. Imagine. The owner begins to misplace things. He hunts, finds them again in a place he has looked. Oh, the tricks are endless. And remember: A reign of terror is finest when insanity is its root! How do I know?"

He leaned over and smiled. "Long ago they called *me* insane and tried to hide me away. Long ago, when she was born, they said the same of Dolores. But we'll show them, won't we, Jim?" He began to laugh. "Insane, they said! When I know more of hypnotism than any other hundred men alive! And I can teach you, as I've taught Dolores! And I know more about brain surgery, more about injections, more about nerve surgery to kill certain reflexes, destroy certain reactions — Oh, I am so much wiser than those fools who've hated me! Wait until I control this continent!"

Jim nodded. How simple, how lovely and right it sounded from the lips of this tiny grey man with the bright eyes.

"But devotion is what I ask of you," the little man said. Devotion to me, to Dolores, to our work. You must believe it. There was a fault somewhere in Freddie. He had spells when he doubted, when he squirmed and ran. But you will not!"

"No, no!" Jim wanted to shout it again and again. He must please this man whose eyes seemed to contain the meaning of all the world.

"No?" The little man arched a brow. "Give me your hand again." He struck a match and lit a piece of paper. "Hold it until it is ashes. And how does it feel, Jim?"

"It feels just the way it should. Just the way it should," Jim whispered.

The little man smiled.

"Soon we will consider your face, Jim," he said. "A few changes here and there. It won't be difficult. Just enough to protect you from the friends who would trouble you."

IT WAS four o'clock in the morning. Already the first shadows of winter darkness were gathering. Father stood at the window, and Jim stood with him, looking and waiting for Dolores to return from Long Island and take them away. Father's luggage was packed. His coat was thrown over the faded couch. His lips moved as he talked to himself. Jim felt a warm and drowsy serenity fill him. He was going away. Going away to happiness. . . .

"Ah, my child is back," Father whispered as the long sedan nosed into the passageway and stopped. The door opened and Dolores got out and waved up at them. How lovely she was, Jim was thinking. And I am going with her, where her eyes will always watch me. Where I can always drift in a sleep.

Dolores started around to the front door. At that moment two men materialized out of the half shadows. One of them called. His voice was blunt and loud. Dolores paused and then stepped back. The men came toward her as she retreated back into the passageway.

Father's breath hissed into a frantic cry. "Who are they? What do they want with her? Why, they have guns! Look, guns!"

Dolores screamed and ran past the car toward the rear of the dead-end passage. There, trapped, she stopped and turned. Her lips were drawn back and her white teeth glistened. She fumbled with her purse. One of the men shouted. Dolores'

hand reappeared from her purse, and a revolver kicked and fired in her hand. The man's shout broke into a scream, and then a heavier roar drowned out the blast of the revolver. Father was screaming and pounding at the window in rage.

Then, as Jim watched, he saw Dolores straighten stiffly and clutch at her mouth. The gun fell. She seemed to try to scream. She fell where her purse had fallen.

Father leaped across the room and jerked open the door. Jim could not understand. He turned in confusion, trying to think what to do. Father was racing down the front stairs to the street. Jim ran after him, shouting for him to wait. The door slammed behind him. When Jim reached the front steps, Father was floundering along the slick walk, trying to run toward Broadway. More men converged from doorways. Shouts echoed and tangled. Then car brakes howled—too late. The front bumper caught the fleeing tiny man and seemed to kick him upward. He struck the fire hydrant and bent grotesquely. When he fell, he lay grotesquely, like a knife that had been forced back and broken, in an attempt to close it in the wrong way.

The men along the street were still for moments. Jim stood still. His head seemed to ache. His throat felt dry. He felt lost and ill and forsaken. He couldn't remember clearly. He could scarcely

(Continued on page 109)

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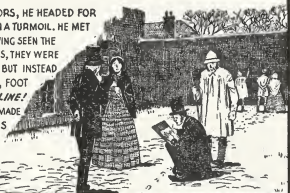
# Adventures into



## *The DEVIL WALKS at NIGHT*

ON THE MORNING OF FEBRUARY 9TH, 1855, A FARMER LIVING NEAR EXMOUTH WAS UP AT DAWN. AS HE STEPPED OUT INTO THE THIN SNOW HE NOTICED STRANGE HOOF-LIKE PRINTS ON HIS DOORSTEP. THEY LED STRAIGHT ACROSS THE FARM YARD TO THE SIDE OF THE BARN. THEN THE FARMER SAW SOMETHING THAT SENT A CHILL OF SUPERSTITIOUS TERROR UP AND DOWN HIS SPINE--*THE TRACK CAME OVER THE ROOF OF HIS COTTAGE AND CONTINUED OVER THE ROOF OF THE BARN!*

**W**ARNING HIS FAMILY TO STAY INDOORS, HE HEADED FOR EXMOUTH. THE TOWN SEEMED TO BE IN A TURMOIL. HE MET TERRIFIED PEOPLE, ALL REPORTING HAVING SEEN THE STRANGE PRINTS. TO ALL APPEARANCES, THEY WERE THE IMPRESSION OF A DONKEY'S HOOF. BUT INSTEAD OF PROGRESSING FEET RIGHT AND LEFT, FOOT HAD FOLLOWED FOOT--*IN A SINGLE LINE!* IT WAS WHISPERED THAT THE DEVIL HAD MADE THEM! DEVIL OR NOT, THE MYSTERIOUS VISITOR HAD STEPPED OVER A 14 FT. WALL, HAD GONE THROUGH A SPACE A FOOT HIGH AND HAD PASSED ONCE DOWN OR ACROSS EACH GARDEN OR COURTYARD IN NEARLY EVERY HOUSE IN EXMOUTH.



*A DRAWING OF THE ACTUAL TRACK AS SKETCHED BY A GENTLEMAN OVER WHOSE ESTATE IT PASSED WAS REPRODUCED IN THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS OF FEBRUARY, 1855.*

*THIS DRAWING WAS COPIED FROM THAT ILLUSTRATION.*



# the UNKNOWN

By—  
Frederick  
Blakeslee

SOON REPORTS BEGAN TO COME IN FROM FAR AND NEAR, FROM TOPSHAM, DAWLISH, TORQUAY & TOTNES. THE HOOF-MARK IN EVERY PARISH WAS THE SAME SIZE & THE STEP THE SAME LENGTH AND PASSING OVER HOUSETOPS & WALLS AS IF THESE HAD BEEN NO IMPEDIMENT AT ALL. IT WAS FOUND THE "THING" HAD CROSSED *TWO MILES* OF OPEN WATER, THE ESTUARY OF THE RIVER EXE. IT WAS LATER COMPUTED THAT "IT" HAD COVERED MORE THAN *ONE HUNDRED MILES IN A SINGLE NIGHT!*

NO KNOWN ANIMAL OR MAN COULD HAVE TRAVELED THAT FAR IN ONE NIGHT -- NEITHER DOES ANY KNOWN ANIMAL WALK IN A LINE OF SINGLE STEPS, NOT EVEN MAN -- *WAS IT THE DEVIL?*



THE PHENOMENON WAS REPORTED IN THE DAILY PRESS AND DISCUSSION RAGED FOR WEEKS. THE PUBLIC HAD ALL KINDS OF INGENUOUS EXPLANATIONS THAT DISREGARDED THE KNOWN FACTS. THE GENTRY AND THE CLERGY WHO LIVED IN THE AREA AND WHO STUDIED THE TRACKS WERE FRANKLY PUZZLED.

A PERIOD OF SUPERSTITIOUS TERROR GRIPPED THE COUNTRYSIDE. "VILLAGERS, LABOURERS, THEIR WIVES & CHILDREN; OLD CRONES & TREMBLING OLD MEN," LOCKED THEIR DOORS AND REFUSED TO STIR OUT AFTER SUNSET. *THEY* KNEW WHO HAD MADE THOSE TRACKS -- IT WAS THE DEVIL'S WALK AND NONE OTHER!



IT *MIGHT* HAVE BEEN THE DEVIL AS FAR AS ANYONE KNOWS BECAUSE THE TRACK HAS NEVER BEEN EXPLAINED.





He stood there, his mind made up at last. He'd kill Sonia and free himself, he decided.

## Beautiful—But Dead

By DOROTHY DUNN

*Whoever was his liberator—and Sonia's killer—Barry didn't know. But even so, gratitude filled him, for there, down the lonely road to the death house—but for the grace of God—walked Barry MacLane!*

THE GIRL was in Barry MacLane's blood by now, deep under his skin. He didn't even like her, but he had to be with her. He knew it was just fascination. A primitive fascination, enabling her to open the grave of evil that a man might have kept buried in himself all his



life. She dug her little white teeth into hallowed ground and snapped up the coffin lid of desire. And once let out, the madness pounded through the body like tom-toms beating deep in the jungle.

There were times when Barry felt ready to join the nearest zoo. There were times when he felt remorse. There were times when he felt like killing her. He wondered if the spell would break with her death, if he'd ever be able to go back to Margaret and be himself.

A thousand times a day he told himself to try it. Kill Sonia and see. It was worth a try. When the object of a fascination no longer exists, the fascination is gone.

He was sitting in the bar where he'd met her. There was a gusty wind outside that had been trying to blow up a storm all afternoon. Meanwhile the day had been hot, with its atmosphere pressing down heavier and heavier in expectancy of the rain that everybody said the farmers needed.

It wasn't easy to breathe. Fred, the bartender, wiped the glasses behind the bar with a lazy rag and even the drinkers were taking it slowly.

Barry noticed that Fred kept an eye on the street, watching scraps of paper being lifted, watching women's skirts begin to flutter. He'd serve a customer and then watch the street.

But Barry didn't look out. He knew the wind was blowing. It was blowing inside of him, too, blowing with a distant whine that would set his insides screaming later on, and he'd have to leave the bar and go to see Sonia again. He didn't want to see her tonight. All day he'd been thinking about her milky white neck and her full velvet lips, and he'd felt the soft neck under his fingers, squashing up under his fingers like dough that's being kneaded by hand. He'd seen the lips in his mind, crushed like a Concord grape, and gradually turning as purple.

And he knew if he killed her that way it would take a long time and he would enjoy it. But he couldn't kill the evil that she had loosed in his body if he enjoyed the killing. It couldn't be done that way.

He'd have to do it in a clean, quick way with a gun, without touching her. He'd have to stand in the doorway and do it quickly, impersonally. It would have to be the old Barry killing her, not the new.

He mustn't go there tonight. He didn't have a gun; he had just his hands.

HE ORDERED his third brandy, trying not to think about Sonia at all. He wouldn't even think about killing her. He'd think about Margaret, with her clear blue eyes, her smart, light little step, her crisp dresses. He'd think about the plans they had for a home after their marriage. They wanted a little house, but a good one. There would be a studio for him, where he could do his magazine illustrations in peace. He might even get to the serious art that Margaret wanted him to try.

Illustrations? Barry shuddered and called for another drink. How long since he'd worked? He didn't know. There was a half-finished magazine cover on his board that had been overdue for two weeks or more. He couldn't work with Sonia dragging him down like this. It had been a long time since he'd worked, since he'd seen Margaret.

His hands shook now as he lifted the glass. A rumble of thunder brought Fred over.

"There it is!" Fred said, sagging on the bar. "Going to be a peach of a storm. We sure need it." He sounded as though he wanted credit for bringing it about. He'd waited for it, watched the wind.

"It's hot," said Barry. He had to say something. The roll of thunder had sounded like a reverberation of his own turbulent emotions. It had sounded like

a call from Sonia, urgent, irresistible.

A flash of lightning lit the dim bar for a moment, making the neon bulbs flicker. The clap that followed was like a fury loosed, and the rain started pelting down.

"There it is," said Fred joyously. "Cats and dogs. Look at that rain! Just look!"

Barry was looking. The sky seemed to have opened up. The water came rushing down with a lashing whip-like quality and the violence of the thunder claps, the split, jagged lightning streaks, brought his pulses pounding up into his throat.

He was going to Sonia. He knew he was. He couldn't help it. Some force inside of himself that always seemed to be controlled by a force outside of himself, was turning his whole body into a fiery turmoil that could listen only to the call of something deadly, something evil. Sonia was both.

He threw a bill on the bar and staggered toward the door. Fred tried to stop him.

"Wait a while, Mr. MacLane," he called. "Don't go out in that."

Barry didn't even turn around. He pulled the door open and stepped out of the tavern into the downpour. He'd be soaked by the time he reached the corner. It didn't matter. The drive of the rain felt good on his face and the lightning blazes only lit up his own excitement.

Barry MacLane, commercial artist with a money future. Or talented artist with the crown of genius waiting, according to Margaret. What faith she had in his work! Barry MacLane, the guy who had always watched his health and his hands. They were good hands, but when he caught cold the joints sometimes stiffened. He'd always been careful not to catch cold. But that was the old Barry, the dead Barry. This new Barry didn't care.

The hell with his hands. What was the use? He couldn't hold a brush steady any more, anyway. Sonia had seen to

that. Sonia had lured him into the fantastic web of complete degeneration. Sonia had ruined him. Now he would ruin Sonia! He'd fall under her primitive spell one last time, and then he'd free himself. He'd kill her and free himself.

He'd go back to Margaret.

SONIA was there. She always was, it seemed. There and waiting for him, as if she knew just when he'd come.

Her black hair was loose around her shoulders, her gown a filmy thing, red and floating and provocative.

She put her hands on his shoulders, her almond-shaped eyes dancing across his face with delight.

Her voice was vibrant, mocking.

"Darling, you're so wet! Come, take off the coat and your shoes. Why do you stand there like a dripping ghost from the sea? You need a drink. I'll fix you something warming."

She gave him a little shove toward the bedroom and he obeyed. He always obeyed. He took off his wet things and came back wrapped in a quilt, eager for the glass she handed him. It burned down deep and he relaxed.

"You make a man comfortable, Sonia."

"Yes, Barry."

She curled up on the rug at his feet, staring into the depths of her own glass with a strange little smile on her lips. Like a cat, Barry thought. Like a lovely, sinuous cat with secrets beyond my knowing.

He asked for another drink and she pointed lazily to the shaker beside his chair. A mixture of her own. Something pleasant and volatile. Something like the lotus, exotic and magical. Something like Sonia herself, different from anything he'd ever tasted.

His anger left him. His purpose and his will left him. He wanted nothing except what he had now. The whole world seemed shut into this room with Sonia.

and the lashing rain outside was a forgotten thing.

He reached out and she moved toward his knees in one hunch, like a cat shifting position. He dropped his hand to her hair, moving it across her cheek to her creamy throat. He caressed her dreamily, feeling nothing except the peaceful throbbing of pure evil in him. Evil can be pure, he thought. And when it's pure, all conflict is removed. That was Sonia's power. She was all evil, and there wasn't a single distraction to break the spell.

Barry gave up as she raised herself and lifted her lips. This was just another night like all the rest. He couldn't do it. He couldn't kill her. He'd never be able to kill her. It was she who was killing him. Not with a gun, not with her hands. She would kill him with herself, letting him drive the knife into his own heart.

There wasn't any hope. He'd never get back to Margaret and the old Barry MacLane. Never. All thought eased away from him as he lifted her into his arms.

This wasn't a night for murder. This wasn't a night for anything except Sonia, who was a dream out of any man's buried and primitive self.

It was worth it. Let her kill him in her own way. Let her bury him with all the others she must have buried. Margaret seemed as cold and remote as the white figurine that sat on the mantel in his forsaken studio. Poor Margaret. She'd

have to find another man to build her that house. He was sorry, but there it was.

He placed his lips on Sonia's and it was like any other night. It would always be that way. It would kill him, but at the moment it seemed a good way to die.

NEXT MORNING, when he awoke after the heavy, dreamless sleep, she was dead. She was horribly dead, with blood seeping out of her chest onto the sheet. Her almond-shaped eyes were fixed in a mocking stare, and her full, sensuous mouth was hanging open.

Barry was sick, sicker than he'd ever been in his life. Then he tried to pull his quivering frame together.

She'd been shot. The hole was there, just over her heart. The clean way. He hadn't done it. He'd wanted to, but he hadn't had a gun—just his hands, and his hands had been too weak.

Somebody had slipped in during the night. Probably up the fire escape and through the window. The window was open now, and the cold air after last night's storm was sweeping the room.

Barry hadn't heard the shot and evidently nobody else had. He knew by the taste in his mouth that Sonia put something in her cocktail mixtures. He didn't know what, but he always knew the next day there had been something. That was part of her control over the men she kept

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to herself. That must have been part of her secret to keep them from killing her. Barry had always known he wasn't the only one. He had always known the depths of her evil.

He dressed thoughtfully, his suit wrinkled and still slightly damp from the rain last night. As he knotted his tie before the mirror, he noticed that his fingers were steadier than they'd been for a month. He was aware of his red-rimmed eyes, his hollowed cheeks. Sonia didn't leave a man much. But he was aware of something else. A weight had been lifted from his being, and as he took one last look at the dead girl with blood over her heart, he felt the coffin lid close back over his desires. Softly, subtly. As quickly as she had opened it, her death closed it.

Barry had known it would be that way. He had known it, struggled toward it, never quite able to achieve the murder that he knew must be accomplished. Somebody had had more strength of will than he'd ever have been able to summon out of his own bewitched being. He'd been so close to it when the storm broke last night. And so far away from it the minute he was with Sonia!

But somebody—some unknown deliverer—had come along. Barry checked his pockets to be sure he had all his belongings. He'd just leave. Just leave in the ordinary way, but be sure there's nothing left behind. He found a towel and went over every surface, where his prints might be found. Sonia had a dozen like him. There was no reason why the police should decide he was the one. He hadn't been the one. There was somebody else with a gun who had come up the fire escape and fired through the window, through her heart.

Somebody else! Barry was free, and freedom began to bring him back where he belonged, back up the road he thought he'd lost forever—the road of self-respect that led to his work, to Margaret and all

the things the two of them had planned together.

He'd get out quietly. Sonia lived in a building as secretive as her own dark ways. Shadowy figures came and went. Nobody paid any attention. Nobody cared. Later, they'd find her. A dozen men might feel free, or go crazy, but nobody would care. Not really care. The fascination of mysterious ways ends with the mystery of death, and life takes over for those who are left behind.

Life! Barry stepped into the deserted areaway, closing Sonia's door behind him.

The clean rush of a rain-washed dawn overtook him and he found himself walking down the shabby street with joy. The sun was just breaking over the rim of the city and he felt good.

A man reborn. A man alive again to hope, to ambition, to decency.

Sometimes, thought Barry, murder can be a good thing. He was glad he wouldn't have the guilt of it on his soul, but he wished the killer, whoever he was, could know how grateful he was feeling for this new release from the poisonous spell of Sonia.

He stopped in an all-night place for scrambled eggs. Then he went to his apartment for the long sleep. The good sleep. No evil, no drug mixed with liquor. No nothing. Just a prelude to a new day, to the work in his studio, to Margaret and their dreams.

The plaster figurine on his mantel, cold and white, smiled as he slept in his own bed that day. Barry MacLane was back again. Back where he belonged.

**T**HE POLICE never did come. Barry waited a week, then two. He finished the magazine cover, long overdue, and started another.

He began eating again, having his clothes pressed. He'd written Margaret a note, telling her he was swamped but he

loved her. He wanted to get his life really in order before he saw her again, get all the bad blood out of his system, get the bad dreams over with.

The papers hadn't made much of Sonia's murder. Just a column on the sordid side, nothing to glamorize her death. She was a nobody, unmourned. The police were hardened to such things. And dead, she wouldn't have seemed good copy to the reporters. If they'd known her alive, they'd have written a different story, but her power over others had died when she did.

Barry didn't doubt for a minute that the police were working to solve Sonia's murder. They always do. It was a job to them, just as commercial art was a job to him. It was something you did the best you could, if you had a talent for it.

They'd get around to him eventually. He didn't know how, exactly, but he thought they would. It wasn't a thing that worried him, though. They couldn't prove anything. He didn't own a gun, and Sonia had been shot with a gun. By somebody else. Maybe they'd get to the somebody else first. Barry had respect for the police. An innocent man, picked up for somebody else's crime, is the exception and not the rule.

The third week. Barry's cheeks had begun to fill out, his life to get back on its own smooth, ambitious course. His brushes were held in steady fingers now; his work showed not only the old talent, but a new depth of enthusiasm. He'd had a rest. A forced rest.

He felt that he'd go to see Margaret soon. He'd been thinking about her, dreaming of her.

Barry MacLane. The old Barry MacLane was back again. This was where he'd come in. He decided he was ready to see Margaret, if she'd have him after this long a time.

He called her, a long list of apologies ready, a longer list of excuses.

She surprised him.

"Never mind, Barry. I know how it's been. And, darling, I'm very anxious to see you. Why don't you ask me to come to your studio tonight?"

"But, Margaret . . ." He'd wanted to take her out, make a memory tour of all their favorite places, where the background music was sweet and the wine superb.

"Please, Barry! I know I've never been there for longer than a few minutes, but I want to see some of the new work you've been doing."

So he invited her. He cleaned the place up a little and waited for her happily, a bottle of sherry on his cocktail table. He'd never seen Margaret drink anything stronger than sherry. Moderate in all things. A woman who would make a wonderful wife and a perfect mother. Just the kind of woman any sane man would want.

SHE CAME at eight and stepped into his studio with her characteristic light step. He took her into his arms, telling her how he loved her, how he'd always loved her.

It took a few minutes for him to realize that she was pulling away from him. She walked about, looking at his work. "Nice," she said. "Very nice. You have a great future, Barry. I always did believe in your talent and your future, you know."

"I know," he said. "But forget the talent for the time, honey. Let's talk about us."

"Us?"

"Of course, dear. Our marriage, our house."

She walked into the other room and sat on the sofa stiffly. Barry poured the sherry and she reached for the glass without a single protest. She usually said, "Oh, no, really," before she took it. He

(Continued on page 110)

*The clash of metal against metal was his symphony. . . .  
And wherever metal was used, in steel girder or shining  
machine, there his domain lay. . . . For he was the new god  
—the God of Steel—and how could mere men hope to  
destroy him?*

Eerie Novelette  
of Living Steel

By BRYCE WALTON





The metal bar in his hand seemed to writhe and quiver like a snake as he came toward me, getting bigger all the time.

# THE STEEL GOD

## CHAPTER ONE

### Blood Boss

**T**HE NURSE'S eyes stretched toward him out of the corner. Detectives and a dainty grey man from the district attorney's office surrounded the bed, poised like hounds pointing quail. He was a shapeless blob of bulging steel braces and white wrappings rising out of the bed, a mound without form or move-



ment that ended in a smaller bulge containing a wet line, a mouth. A hand moved to make shorthand symbols on a paper pad. The mouth interrupted its own monologue, it trembled. "He'll get me yet. He'll murder me."

The fat detective tapped his bald head. The man from the D.A.'s office licked his thin lips. He said. "You're in bad shape, Burack. You may be dying now."

The opening in the mound of gauze moved. "No, not yet. He'll get me in his own way, when he's ready."

"Do you mean Martin will get you?"

"Martin. Yes, that's right. Martin."

The dainty grey man said softly, "He can't get you now. He's dead, Burack. Remember, you shot him six times with Herzog's .38. You're going to tell us about it. You've agreed to confess."

The mouth called Burack hung open.

The nurse thought: He'll die like this, and soon, I hope. Just his face alive and the rest of him dead and broken. Body completely shattered and paralyzed. Even if he lived he'd never be able to move again. Nothing but a pile of plaster, wrappings, and steel braces. . . .

"Yes," the mouth said. "I shot him six times. But he didn't die. He can't die. He's part of the skeletons that dance with metal joints. . . ."

The dainty man said softly, "Two others have died, Burack. Herzog was sapped too hard. You were going to tell us about that too. And then we found . . ."

The mouth laughed, a crazy climbing note of terror.

\* \* \*

GIL SUMMERS, a private dick I used to work with, guided me to this job. It was too tough for him to handle. He wouldn't tell me much about it, but he said it was a job well-cushioned with greenery. "I wouldn't take it," he said, "but it's there."

I went to that modern office building

on Park Avenue early in the morning. The secretary told me I'd have to wait. but I've never liked to wait and she didn't have the qualities to alter my character, so I went on past without saying anything, and through a metal door framed in glass brick.

I saw Martin and nothing else, at first, a giant shaped like a big greasy frog. His desk was a square of gleaming metal. The floor and walls were some kind of cold alloy. I felt reduced to mouse-size fast, and I started to be scared of Martin and the room. So I immediately started to hate him because I've always hated anything that made me afraid.

The desk was set up high, with him behind it looking down at me. One of the biggest men in the world, physically and financially, he was the International Steel Corporation. He was self-made, had started at the bottom as a cold-roller machine operator in a steel and iron works.

His red eyes were like angry molten metal, and his jowls slavered with what seemed to me to be thick black oil. He opened his mouth wide.

"You weren't announced," he said.

I was wishing that I'd waited, and mad at myself for wishing it. . . .

I've been to steel mills and iron works, places like that. His voice sounded like that, like something grinding out, hard, like metal clanking together. I was sure that he could raise it, make it roar and yammer like the din that comes out of steel mills. He opened and clenched his big hands. I could see metal being smashed and tormented into new shapes.

I started to sweat. A kind of panic grew inside me, tightening my scalp. I couldn't answer him. His wide mouth stretched at me.

He had hulking shoulders inside a grey suit, and jowls for a neck. His hair was grey. He stood up all-the way and moved around toward me. I noticed the long, smooth steel bar in his hands. It was



shiny and about a yard long and two inches thick. He was never without it, I'd heard. It probably weighed thirty or forty pounds, and he carried it like a cane.

Ugly laughter spilled over me. "You must be Bill Burack, the guy who wants to work for me. You're supposed to be tough."

My throat burned. I was mad because I was scared of him.

"You don't need a bodyguard," I said. "The world does."

He roared a laugh. "You're supposed to be tough," he repeated. He slapped the steel bar down on the palm of his hand.

"I've never exploited that reputation," I said. "Gil Summers told me you needed an arm. But I don't think I care for the job."

He said. "I don't think you have the guts for it."

He was grinning out of that wide, oily mouth. My hands started to tingle as I thought of how it would be to smash at that fat face. But I didn't like the idea, none of it. This was one place where I almost threw in the towel to fear. Then I saw her as I started to turn and walk out.

She was standing by the wall beside a chrome-and-steel bar. She was drinking a martini. She had it all, the oval face and strong nose and tender nostrils and glinting black hair in a rich cloud. She had the full red lips and the bare soft shoulders flowering up out of a tight winter-

cream dress. Yes, she had it all. Plus.

It was funny the way her thought came to me as clearly if she'd cried it out loud:

*"I'm afraid of him. I hate him and want to see him dead. What are you going to do about it?"*

I kept looking at her, and I made it as obvious as I could to Martin when I said, "On second thought I might take the job. Credentials, five years a cop, four years a Marine, a private dick for three."

I heard Martin say, while I was still looking at her. "My wife, Marie. Marie, this is Bill Burack. He specializes in being tough."

Between what they both did to me, hammers started banging in my stomach. I heard him saying. "He associates with gunsels and crooks and sharpshooters and grifters. And he thinks that makes him tough."

He bulked over me, his big, blunt fingers spread out, clenching and lifting. I thought of a couple of mechanical hammers getting ready to pummel white-hot metal. The length of shiny metal bar slid back and forth through his palm.

**"YOUR** credentials don't mean a damn thing to me, Burack. I make my own tests. You have to be tough, really tough and hard. I demand a hardness of metal that can't be estimated. Not just harder than chromium or molybdenum steel. But *hard*, Burack!"

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I looked at her again. Blood fled from her face, and the circles of rouge were like spots on a clown's mask. Her mouth was partly open, trembling a little, and she was leaning toward us avidly. I felt cold, and my muscles tingled. I thought of the spectators I'd seen watching a bull fight at Tiahuanca. She whispered thickly. "Jay . . . not here . . ."

I didn't know what was coming. Then he hit me.

He didn't use the alloy bar. And I never saw his fist start, just a slight shifting of his shoulders like a stuffed seabag. I never saw it coming, but I knew when it arrived. Fire exploded in front of me, and sickness climbed up my throat. And through it I heard Marie sigh. A deep, hungry sigh.

I teetered, but I didn't fold, I don't know why. He moved with ponderous calculation. He dropped the metal bar on the rug. Both fist hammers chopped away. My belly went back against my spine, and I started to fold. He lifted me under the chin with his right, his fists like sacks of chain.

I felt like a two-day drunk in a foggy room. But her eyes held me up like a couple of magnets, and I stood there taking it, trying to drive some action into my arms. I knew how often she'd sat at the edge of a ring watching guys make hamburger out of the other's faces. I knew what she was, but it didn't make any difference.

I began to feel cold and sick all over.

"Tough," I heard him say. "I keep telling Marie that only metal is tough. She doesn't believe it, I tell her they don't make men really tough any more. She doesn't believe that, either. She keeps trying to find out."

Through the fog I saw her eyes. That was all. Electric trains purred in my head, and warm blood inside my mouth kept running down my throat. But all I could think of was my shame and fear. I heard his voice echoing: "She keeps

trying to find out." He laughed then.

Her eyes gave me the stuff, and I said to them, "You've found out, Mrs. Martin."

I guess Martin thought I was through, and I should have been, but I wasn't. I had one chance, one try before I'd fold up. I threw everything, gave everything to it. One punch, and it was like heaving a shot-put—so heavy to get started, but so hard to stop. It started way back somewhere, and I felt it going, going, my weight and her hate and my hate and her eyes behind it. It smashed on his hard, grey chin.

I felt bones crack, my own. It was like running into a steel door. Pain bounced back and went off like a firecracker in my head. He roared and went down on his knees, then heaved himself back up. I stared at my bleeding hand. His eyes were slightly out of focus as he glared at me, and his breath came in gurgles.

"You're hired," he said.

Her voice joined mine when I answered him. But it was a silent voice that he didn't hear. *"I'm going to kill you, Martin. Both of us together can get you, some way."*

He climbed back behind his desk, and I kept on standing there. I knew it looked good, but I wanted to lie down and rest. His voice hadn't changed. It was still the roaring and yammering of a steel and iron works. I'd fooled him, and her too. That last punch had finished me, but they didn't know it. Though I knew that Martin could have gone on and on.

"I guess he's pretty tough, Jay," she said. Her voice was shaky.

He said, "The world is mine," as a sort of reminder. "I mean by that, that around me is always a world of my own making. It's a metal world, and I control it. The buildings, bridges, cars, trains, planes—all metal, and it comes from me."

Marie sipped her martini. She isn't yours, I thought, and you don't like to think about that.

"I'm my own law. I have my own lawyers to handle things my way. I have my own police to deal out my own justice. I dislike police paid for by the people; they're not hard enough, Burack. I hire my own defense and offense. My justice is my own. My men do what I want done, and in my own way. Is that clear to you, Burack?"

I nodded.

"Maybe your friend, Summers, explained to you. A man threatened me. Demanded money. Summers wasn't tough enough."

I nodded again.

"I receive extortion notes, Burack, kidnapping threats, labor threats. My wife is sometimes insulted. I started on the bottom, in a slag heap. I'm on top, and to get here a lot of people were shoved aside. I'm always being threatened. You'll take care of these things. You'll be my chauffeur, my constant companion. What I want done you'll do. I'm sure you'll find the pay worth your while."

He waited.

"I will," I said.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Steel God

THAT'S the way I remember it starting off, like a piledriver, and that's the way it went right on through to the end. Like a giant machine grinding.

I was with him all the time, except when he sent me out to deal with someone. Sometimes I had to take strong measures, but I never worried afterwards. There are people bigger than mayors and police commissioners. And Martin was bigger than those people.

He never got tired. He moved all the time, heavily and steadily. He handled everything himself, his business I mean, except for a few details. He was either at his office, or at a caucus browbeating

boards of directors, or fighting presidents and vice-presidents and chairmen. Or he was going some place in a deadly rush in that big black specially built torpedo of a car with me at the wheel.

I'd never driven anything like it before; I'd never known that such a machine was running around. Sixteen cylinders of heavy steel and shatter-proof glass.

"My steel," he said.

And when we drove through the streets, he'd fill up the back seat and look out. "My buildings," he'd say. "My steel holds them up." And when we crossed bridges in that rushing black torpedo, they were his bridges.

He insisted that we go at insane speeds. And inside those thick, black, steel walls, it never seemed as if we were going so fast.

Sometimes Marie was with us. Now and then I got a chance for a few words and looks with her. But we didn't need many words; we understood each other.

But the pace was killing me. I got bone-tired from going, going and never stopping. I lost weight. I wanted to stop. I wanted just to dope off and stay doped off for a year. But I had to keep on going.

There was the afternoon I remember when I drove Martin to a jeweler by Rockefeller Plaza and waited outside while he went inside to pick up a few thousand dollars worth of ice trinkets for Marie. She waited with me where he'd left us in the black torpedo.

I felt the electric tension of her back there, her eyes burning into me. I watched him roll across the sidewalk, and in his hand gleamed that shiny metal bar.

"What's the bar for?" I said.

I rolled up the glass so her perfume would fill the car.

"That's his magic wand," she said softly. "He's insane, haven't you noticed? He thinks he's the new god of the new age of steel." She laughed. There was no humor in it. "That bar's a super-hard alloy sam-

ple from one of his mills or something."

"A magic wand," I said.

"He's insane, Burack. He says he's a modern Vulcan, and that bar of metal is part of him, like Vulcan's hammer."

"Who the hell is Vulcan?" I asked.

"His mother kicked him out of heaven."

The bar flashed in the sun, and then he was out of sight. "Doesn't he ever rest?" I asked.

"He doesn't have to. When one of his metal parts shows wear he can just order a new one from one of his factories." Her voice was starting to shake. She was scared of him.

"What did you marry him for? It must not be very much fun," I said.

"Money, security," she said. "Naturally."

"That's not the reason, Marie. You like power and strength. Maybe you thought you'd like to play goddess to the new metal god."

"That might have been part of it too," she said.

I leaned my head on the steel edge around the glass. "Metal's cold, though."

And she said. "Very damned cold."

THAT was pretty close, though we hadn't had much time to talk. We knew what the setup was, though, between us. She hated and feared him and wanted him dead. I wanted him dead. And—this is funny—I began to hate her. It wasn't any kind of feeling I can explain. I wanted her, and I hated her, too. I was in a fever, and I didn't know what it was.

Martin was listening to the radio one night, late, out in his big ten-bedroom mansion on Long Island. I went out on the porch for some air, and there was Marie sipping her martini.

I felt her warmth as I stood beside her. She emptied the glass and threw it away. It broke somewhere in the dark. She had a habit of breaking her martini glass. Her eyes glowed in the dark. "There's just

something in the name," she said. "I don't like martinis. I like daiquiris better."

I got it. Martin. Martinis. You emptied the glass, then broke it.

I managed a faint laugh. Her hands found my hand. It was like high-tension wire. "Bill, I'm so scared. I keep thinking—thinking that maybe he can't die . . . ever. . . ."

The wind seemed cold all at once. I squeezed her hand. "Don't worry about it. Something will give us a lead in."

She went back inside. But the wind stayed cold. I looked at the stars and they looked clean. I wanted to get out then, leave the city, and go to the country. I'd been figuring on something like that when Summers told me about this job. The city was beginning to get me down; I was beginning to hate its dirt and sweat and smothering hopelessness.

And then I stopped thinking about getting away. I knew I couldn't. I thought of getting rid of Martin, and getting Marie and all that dough. And I thought of getting rid of the fear. He'd made me afraid, and killing him was the only way to get rid of the fear. No one or no thing had ever gotten away with making me afraid. Even the Japs during those long nights in the wet dark hadn't gotten away with doing that to me. I'd been beaten up too many times when I was a kid for being scared, and I'd decided never to be scared again.

But she'd planted that cold whisper in my ear. "*Maybe he can't die . . .*"

I wondered if he could die. The question kept crawling into my brain. I doubt if I'd ever have tried to find out, if it hadn't been for Marie. But we never actually talked about it until that time right at the last. We understood each other.

\* \* \*

I drove him around. I did things for him, the way he wanted them done. I took care of people, the way he wanted them taken care of. I got more bone-tired and

more anxious, and my nerves were shot.

I felt trapped—trapped by Martin and by the metal around us. I kept thinking about what he said, that this was a world of metal. That industry ran the world, and that industry lived on metal. And it was all his.

I got to breaking out in cold sweats, for no reason that I could see. I got to hearing the city where I'd never heard it before. And it sounded like a big symphony of metals clanging together—racking streetcars, banging locomotives, growling engines. And underneath it was a sighing and pounding and rubbing together of steel and iron, all around me.

Martin. How hard would it be to get rid of a man like Martin? He did seem, somehow, not human. Like the spirit of hard, shiny metal. Like soulless metal wheels that grind and grind away without hearts or minds.

Well, I thought, we'd have to get him quick. The metal music was getting too loud. Even sleep didn't get rid of the sounds. I knew that if we didn't do something fast the sounds would go into me too deep, grind too loud in my ears.

I was looking for some gimmick. We got our chance the night Martin had me work over Joe Herzog.

**T**HIS city-sickness had been climbing in me. Pressure was in me, climbing like in a pressure cooker. Part of it was

let off that night on Herzog. I still wanted to show Marie, too, I guess.

We'd been in Jack Whitten's fancy casino until three A.M. Martin and Marie played the bird-cage most of the time, and then Marie switched to roulette just for the hell of it. Both games are strictly for the house's delight, except when a guy with all the dough in the world starts playing for the hell of it. Then the casino started to sweat.

Martin liked that. And by sheer volume Marie at her table forced the sweating croupier to halt the play twice while more chips were brought up from the house cashier.

I stuck to faro, the one game in which a player can get a break. I didn't get one. But Martin's three dice in the bird-cage, strongest percentage trap in any house, paid him plenty.

He grinned at me. "The cage is metal," he explained. "It moves for me." He flourished the shiny metal bar at the cage. "I just wave my magic wand."

I blinked. A sick fear ballooned in my stomach like a basketball. My eyes burned, I needed sleep, I hadn't slept for three days, and I was dead on my toes.

"You look tired, Burack," he grinned. "I don't think you've got what it takes."

Marie laughed beside me. My blood throbbled past my temples. I wanted to yell something angry, and then he said we were leaving.



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I was tired, dopy, or I would have spotted Herzog before he opened up. The way it was, the three of us came out onto the dingy street into the fog, and as we came out, Herzog started triggering away at Martin with a .38. He was crying and hopping around as if he'd had a hotfoot. Martin did that to people.

Martin fell back. I saw dark oily sludge run out of his shoulder. The few people around cleared out fast. I didn't take time to lift my blunt .32 out of its clip. I jumped Herzog and ripped his arm back by the wrist. I was up close and saw the sweat oozing out of his dull white face.

"Teach him better manners," I heard Martin roar. "And I mean *teach* him, Burack!"

Marie pushed past, very close. I heard her whisper, very far away, like part of a wind. "His gun, take it, keep it, Bill."

I felt his .38, cold metal against my hand. I twisted it out of his fingers and dropped it in my coat pocket. I did it fast and easy, and I was sure no one saw it.

Marie was standing against the wall. Rain was starting to sprinkle the sidewalks, but she didn't notice. She wasn't under the awning with Martin. The rain was like splintered glass on her fur and upswept hair. Her lips were hanging apart, her body tense, her eyes eager and waiting.

"All right, I'll make it good for you," I whispered.

I went to work on Herzog. Marie's breath came out heavily. I could almost feel her against me, her touch like high-tension wire. Her body, her voice, even her breath, excited me.

I don't know what Herzog's grudge was against Martin, exactly. That isn't important now. Something about business. Herzog had contributed something to Martin's metallurgical labs. Something that had netted Martin millions and Her-

zog nothing but a drunken hope for revenge.

He was a big man with crummy clothes and red eyes.

I stood him up against the wall and worked fast before the cops showed. Martin would want it that way. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Martin, hunching under the awning like a pillar, holding his bar of super alloy. I guess the rain distorted the color, but his blood looked shiny and black.

I slugged Herzog, and his head thunked back against the wet brick wall. I punched him, where the breastbone ends; it paralyzed him. He couldn't breathe. He started to jack-knife, but I held him up straight and hit him again, only lower down in the belly. That's the way the kids got me, that last time I was afraid.

I hammered away as if I was punching a beanbag. A woman came out of Whitten's casino and fainted. Another woman screamed, but it wasn't Marie.

The walls and the sidewalk seemed to shift around me as I chopped at Herzog's face until it changed into something else. I stepped away from him, and he went backward. His feet slid out and his bloody, unrecognizable face went slipping down the wall.

We left him there, looking up into the rain. His eyes didn't blink. Blood threaded from his open mouth. Even if he were picked up it wouldn't be much because Martin wouldn't prefer charges. He handled everything. Personally.

I brought the car around because the doorman seemed unable to get himself in shape to do it. I helped Martin in first, and then Marie. The metal sides of the car were shiny wet like the skin of a snake. Martin gripped my arm. I half opened my mouth when he did it; his hand was like a steel trap closing; it seemed to crunch on the bone. Tears came to my eyes. "You may last a while, Burack."

Marie slid softly past me. Her eyes

seemed deeper and darker now, her mouth redder. Her smile was a secret only for me. Bold and secret meanings and intimate understanding. Her hand touched my coat pocket, brushed the .38 I'd lifted from Herzog.

I saw Herzog's hopeless dull eyes then, staring up into the night, and not blinking. I hoped he wasn't dead. I felt sick. My knees were rubber and I was glad to get inside that big steel torpedo and shoot it away up the dark street.

I thought of Marie and of the money and of freedom from fear—and of the gun, Herzog's gun, in my pocket. There'd been witnesses to his trying to kill Martin tonight. So tomorrow, the next day, next month, Martin would get some slugs from Herzog's .38 in his big iron brisket. And I'd have Herzog on the scene, somehow, or at least without an alibi.

"And what would it matter to Herzog? He'd wanted Martin crooked. He'd tried it and had been willing to fry to death in the Ossining hot plate to see Martin get what was his. It evened out, I thought. Herzog might even be grateful.

And then I'd have Marie, and that was more than Martin could ever have.

**I** DON'T remember how much time actually passed after that. It was a nightmare, however long it was. It was the things that happen in a dream where there doesn't seem to be any time and everything is twisted and distorted.

I remember finding the bar where poor Herzog nightly drowned the memory of his disillusionment and shame. And the shabby brownstone where he slept off his drunks alone.

I remember driving Martin and Marie around, rushing into the nights and days, walled up in that shining length of black metal. I remember her hands brushing me, her knees touching me, her lips smiling crookedly and waiting.

And I remember that afternoon when

that symphony I was telling about, the symphony of metal sounds, seemed to go through and through me like a million tiny files.

The city was all around me. It was metal, Martin's metal. It was part of Martin. And it would get me if I didn't get Martin first. I had to do it today, I decided, or my mind would crack.

I drove him to his office. He was going to have some kind of meeting there for a few hours. That would give me time to drive back to the house and see Marie. This time I wanted direct and definite words, plans. This time I wanted to be with her alone.

But Martin kept me there a while. He was waiting for someone to get there. He stood with his grey hulk facing away from me, looking out the big window over the city.

"Its skeleton is mine," he said. "Iron and steel bones. When it moves I can hear the skeleton joints grind together."

Past him I saw it. Structures and machines and things running. I saw through the outside and there it was. A skeleton of raw, hard, cold steel. Black, hard, cold iron. It seemed alive. It was like a big growling animal.

"Every age has its gods, eh, Burack?" he said. "What kind of a god would the machine age, the industrial era, have?"

"Metal," I said.

He laughed. "You have imagination, Burack. Yes, it's metal. I'm beginning to feel that I'm that god, or at least one of them."

He towered across the window like a fat girder. His hair glinted.

"Your power is a small thing, Burack, whether you realize it or not. So restricted. Some pitiful piece of humanity that you can work over, like a wolf worrying a rabbit. A woman you can defeat. That's not power."

"What is power?" I said.

Sweat crawled down my face as I stood

in the great steel-and-glass room like something trapped in a steel casket. A casket within a larger casket.

"Power is metal," he said, and he raised the long, shiny steel bar as if it were a pencil. "Iron and chromium, super-hard alloys, and molybdenum steel. If a man could assume their hardness and durability, Burack, he would be the new god of this new age. And who could be more fitted for this new position than I, eh, Burack?"

The room was still except for the muted grinding of steel bones outside. My heart felt like chilled lead. It seemed hard to breath.

"No one," I said. "You'd be perfect."

"I've come up through the stages of metal growth, Burack. From rivers of scummy slag to streamlined cars and planes and trains. It's all mine, I control it, but it's more than that, Burack. I tell you I'm a part of it. I feel the song of the steel in me, I hear it sing, and I sing with it. Anywhere in the world today, when a bridge goes up, when an automobile runs, when a skyscraper keeps on standing. When they go and run and keep on standing, Burack, it's because of me."

He pivoted and fixed his eyes on me. "It's got into me, Burack. The spirit of metal. It's part of me. I can feel it in me, the molecules dancing, the atoms spinning. The stuff running in my veins isn't blood, Burack, it's red-hot molten metal!"

He laughed, and it was like metal clashing against metal. His eyes seemed to expand, those red eyes that were like molten metal.

"This whole world runs on metal, Burack. And you've got to be metal too, or you die. When you're a part of it, when you're super alloy and chromium and tungsten and molybdenum steel, and it's created you and you've controlled it—then that makes you a Metal God, doesn't it, Burack?"

I said. "I guess it does."

He raised the long heavy bludgeon of super-hard alloy. He raised it above his head. "Ever hear of Vulcan?"

I looked at him a long time, my eyes blurred. He seemed to shift around; the alloy bar seemed to twist in his hand.

"He was a god," I said.

"He was the metalsmith of the gods, but—" the voice trembled a little bit—"but he was lame. And he fell."

Then he let me go.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Man Who Couldn't Die

I WALKED numbly out and went down to the car in the parking lot. I got in and sat, smoking cigarettes, trying to think. But the city seemed to be closing in, grinding, clanging, growling in metallic tones. I tried not to admit that the numbness was fear.

Martin. A new Metal God. Gods were made by worship. Didn't people worship industry, machines, oily wheels? How would you get rid of him? And if you did, how would you get away?

It was crazy, thinking like that. Thinking that maybe he couldn't die.

I sat there smoking. I looked at my hands. They were white and covered with drops of sweat. In the car mirror I saw my face. It was white, as if somebody had sketched eyes with bags under them and a bunch of bristles on a clean tablecloth. My eyes were almost lost between drooping lids and the bags underneath. My forehead was slippery, and the metal skeletons all around me were starting to dance.

I got Herzog. I had to do it fast, right then. I couldn't stand it for another day. I was crawling with nerves, scared, and I wasn't the type to go on taking it. I'd machine-gunned twenty Japs one night, watched them tumble in a red wall, because they'd made me afraid. I'd gotten slow



revenge, one by one, on those kids who'd beaten the hell out of me in the alleys, and I couldn't go on taking it from a fat man.

I found Herzog in his bar on Eighteenth Street. I went down to the corner cigar store and phoned him. "I've got something good on Martin," I said.

"Uh," he mumbled. Then his voice shot out at me hard and clear. "What?"

"Something on Martin you'll go for. I'll meet you at your place as soon as you can make it."

It was as if he'd been dunked in ice water. His voice got brittle. "All right." He told me his address, which I already knew.

It was the same gloomy, lonely hole, dirty, and yellow with a dim light in the stinking hall. I waited until he'd opened the door, and I came around the corner and sapped him. Then I dragged him inside and onto his bed, and I started to pour a pint of cheap bourbon down his neck. Then I felt his heart, but it had stopped working for him, for me, for anybody.

My stomach seemed to crumble, and my legs shook. I'd sapped him too hard, all right, and that wasn't my way. I'd always given people something of a chance. Blood ran down over his face, soaking up the greasy pillow.

Then I backed out and stood in the hall. If no one saw me coming or going, the thing still might work out. I thought of

that bar of super alloy Martin was always carrying. I could still kill Martin with Herzog's gun, then put the gun in Herzog's dead hand. Then I could mark that alloy bludgeon of Martin's up with the hair and blood from Herzog's scalp. That would make it look good.

I locked the door and kept his keys with me. I made one more call before I drove out to see Marie.

I WALKED across the wide green lawn and in through the open French windows. She was waiting for me with the inevitable martini in her hand, to drink and then break the glass. I don't remember what she wore except that you'd hardly notice it.

"When am I going to go back to daiquiris?" she pouted. Then she saw my face. She got white and swayed as though she might pass out. But neither of us said anything, even then. She knew what I was thinking because it was what she was thinking. I moved closer to her. If I was crazy, she and the talk about metal did it. I remember her toes painted red. She touched my face.

A new slow smile crept across her eyes. "When are we going to send Vulcan back to heaven?" she asked softly.

That was all. We hadn't really mentioned it before, either of us. Now, all at once, it was out. . . .

I reached my left hand around and



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buried it in the thick hair that clouded her face. Her face lifted to me. I breathed against her parted, pouting lips. Slowly, then, I kissed her.

She moved away and mixed more drinks. She threw her martini glass against the wall and laughed. The radio-phonograph was playing something slow and with a heated beat. The warmth of it and the whiskey was in my blood.

I went to her where she stood looking over the green lawn.

"I'm not afraid of him now," she whispered. "I think you can fix him."

"And what's in it for me," I said. "What do I get?"

Her eyes half closed. "A man who can kill a god can take pretty much what he wants—of what's left."

I looked at her neck. It was long and soft. A vein in it throbbed fast. In my mind's eye, I could see my fingers curling around it, but it was too late now. I should have killed her sooner, and then I'd have been out of the city by this time, out in the country where the noise would never bother me again.

She didn't move, just kept looking at me. The corner of her mouth twitched. I slid my hands flat against her shoulder blades and then down to her waist and pulled her tight against me.

Her lips parted. They were wet and shining, and her skin was hot like fever. Her head went back and she shut her eyes, and I kissed her again. Her arms were tight around my neck and the kiss seemed to last forever.

And then I answered her question. My voice sounded sharp and far away, as if it wasn't my own.

"Today. It has to be today. I can't stand the metal bones dancing any more."

"What?" She started to shake all over.

"Today. But it's got to be done my way. I want to do it right here. And when it's gone, I'll take him over to where Herzog's waiting. I'll leave him there.

Herzog's dead. I killed him, sapped him too damned hard. With Martin's alloy bar, it'll look like a fight."

She sighed. "Here? You mean now, or . . .?"

"Yes, yes, I fixed Herzog in his room so he'll be waiting. I phoned Martin on the way out here. I told him you and I were waiting for him here. He seemed very upset. He said he was coming right over. Come alone, I said, it'll be just the three of us. He laughed at that, even though he was sore as hell, and said he'd be right over."

She dug her sharp red nails into my hands.

"He's coming now," I said. "This is what I want him to see. . . ."

I heard the French doors slam, glass breaking. I saw his big grey shadow across the room. And I pulled her tight against me so he'd get a good look. I smashed her mouth against mine.

I held her tight against me, bent her back, kissed her again.

A sound came out of him. It wasn't a word, just a sound like rough files rubbing together. I saw the shine of the metal bar in his hand. It seemed to writhe and twist like a silver snake.

But he never had time to use it. I raised Herzog's gun up fast. It felt good, a tight, short-barreled Smith & Wesson, and I fired it across Marie's thigh. She cried out and I smelled scorched cloth. I heard the slugs clanging, then thud, hard and deep and final.

I MOVED away from Marie. "Martin," I yelled, "you should have worn a steel vest."

I gave him another. He got bigger and he kept coming toward me. I got panicky. Something snapped inside me and I kept yelling and shooting. I emptied the gun into him. I could hear Marie gasping, and her blurred face was wet and eager.

He didn't die easy, or appear to die

easy, but he finally went down and made a grey mountain on the floor. The floor was rubbery to walk on. I dropped the .38 into my coat. It burned.

Marie stood over him laughing. I had to slap her, and even then she was laughing. "He died," she yelled. "He did die, didn't he? I knew it, Bill. I *knew* he would die."

But the way she said it I knew she hadn't known at all. And neither had I, and I still wasn't sure. I knelt down and felt his pulse. There wasn't any pulse.

The pool spreading out around him on the floor didn't look the right color to me. I dabbed my fingers in it, rubbed my fingers together. "It's like oil," I said.

"But he's *dead*," she said again.

She fell down on her knees beside me. Her hands groped. She had to lift the super-hard alloy bar with both hands. There was blood on her hands and on the metal bar. I moved toward her on my knees, and she pushed herself back, the bar in front of her. Her eyes were wide and white.

"You've got to be tougher than this," I said.

She started to laugh again, wildly. I tried not to listen to her or see the thing on the floor. It was nice and quiet out here in the country, if I didn't listen to her laughing. And I didn't like the idea of going back into the city, of hearing the symphony of steel against steel.

But I had to go, and fast.

"Stay here," I told her as I got onto my feet. "Clean everything up, but good. I'll take him over and leave him with Herzog. I'll wait until dark to carry him inside. I'll put the gun in Herzog's hand, and the bar of metal in Martin's hand, with Herzog's blood on it. Wait for me, baby, and don't crack. For God's sake, don't crack now."

She was still laughing and sliding back across the floor, her knees and hands

bloody, holding the bloody metal bar. And then I realized that she was laughing at me. ~

She laughed and screamed. "You poor moron! You damned coward!"

"Marie!"

"You've killed him, but he's still stronger and tougher than you. You can't kill him, not really. You don't have the guts. Nobody does. He's lying there dead, but he isn't really dead. . . . I thought you had guts, but you're more afraid now than you were before. . . . Get out!" She waved the heavy metal bar. "Get out. I don't want any part of you. *Get out!*"

"Give me that bar," I said. I ran in and grabbed at it. It came down on my forehead and hammered me down to my knees. Warm liquid fell into my eyes. She was babbling, and I felt more blows on my shoulders and head.

I finally had that bar in my hands. I had to have it. She was gone; I didn't see her go. She had evidently run into another part of the house. I dragged Martin out and across the driveway to that big, black metal torpedo. It was like dragging a sack of ingots. I strained until I got him up onto the back seat. I sat him up there and put a blanket over him. I wiped my hands clean, washing them over and over at a side hydrant.

Martin didn't look different than he'd ever looked. He'd always been grey.

The fear rose in me then as I drove down the highway toward the city. I was afraid the city would get me this time. And yet I knew I had to do it. It was funny, but as afraid as I was of the city, the speedometer jumped up to ninety before I'd hardly got started.

The black torpedo jumped higher. It whooshed along, without any noise. I couldn't even hear the air whining past the thick black metal. Then I saw his face in the rear-view mirror. The eyes . . . open . . . red eyes like molten metal. . . . The jaws moved, and the mouth grinned

at me . . . seemed to drip thick black oil.

The motor worked faster and hotly around me. I could feel the metal walls around me, thick and cold. The speedometer read a hundred and ten.

I guess I screamed as I kicked at the accelerator. I thought of cops stopping me, but I thought of so many other things. I took my foot off the accelerator . . . and the car climbed on up to one hundred twenty. A big, black torpedo that wouldn't stop . . . a metal coffin carrying me to hell. . . .

The white highway stretched straight ahead . . . but it wouldn't be straight forever. Then there was a curve. It came up fast, and there was a bridge, with high grey girders. . . .

I was yelling and fighting the wheel; it wouldn't turn. I stamped on the foot-brake and grabbed and strained at the handbrake. Nothing moved. I heard the long screaming sigh of the wind sliding past the metal walls.

They tore at me like hands, the girders of the bridge.

Something exploded in my head. A fire started in me, and salty liquid ran down my throat. I couldn't move except to open my eyes. I was wrapped in hot smoking metal, jammed into a ball of ragged steel. . . . Torn steel lay across me, seemed to be cutting me in two. . . .

Words stamped in the steel . . . in the metal girder . . . words grinning at me, inches from my face:

#### INTERNATIONAL STEEL AND IRON CORPORATION

**T**HE DAINTY man from the D.A.'s office swallowed heavily. He said. "Is that all, Burack? What about Mrs. Martin?"

The hole had become a thin wet line specked with pink froth. It was stubbornly set. The nurse cried.

"Listen, Burack, you killed Jay Martin with Herzog's .38. Now, what about Marie, Mrs. Martin?"

The line parted. It didn't say anything.

"Burack. Marie Martin was found at her home, dead. She'd been bludgeoned to death with that length of steel bar. Martin was already dead. You must have done it before you drove Martin away in the car. Tell us, Burack."

The red hole in the gauze mask screamed, "The alloy bar!"

The man from the D.A.'s office fell back.

"He did it!" screamed the hole in the gauze. "Martin did it!"

The mouth began to laugh then. It climbed higher and higher and snapped like a taut wire.

\* \* \*

It was the next night.

Somebody saw the body fall. It tumbled out through the window of the hospital and down through layers of grey fog, a shapeless blob falling, trailing white tatters of gauze.

Detectives asked questions. Doctors and nurses answered. The nurse was hysterical. She tugged at the fat detective's arm, urging him toward the window.

"How could he have gotten to the window," the detective kept asking doggedly. "Unless somebody carried him and tossed him out. You say it, the doc says it. He couldn't walk. Nothing could have made him walk."

The nurse babbled, "I don't know. I don't know. I came in to check this morning early. He was . . . walking. I don't know how; he just moved over the floor. He leaned out the window. He looked back when I yelled at him. Just his mouth opening, and he said:

*"Even the braces on my legs are steel."*

*"And then he jumped out the window."*

THE END



"... I know now how much you must have hated me, Ruth. . . ."

## DEAR COLD RUTH...

By HENRY HASSE

*Who can fathom the soul of a beautiful woman? Not Connor, whose plans for his wife's murder were ruined—because she insisted on suicide!*

**D**EAR RUTH:  
I was never one for writing much, but anyway I thought you'd like to know that you'll have a fine funeral. I was down to the mortuary yesterday. It was real swell the way they had you fixed out. Remember the dress, the pink one

with the lacy frills that we got for you right after we were married? You never wore it much; you said you wanted to save it for special occasions. Well, they had you fixed out in that. They had your hair fixed different, too.

You looked so pretty there, with the

flowers and all, it made me feel real bad. I got all choked up. I want you to know that, Ruth. I remember thinking, well, I'm glad it was this way. No pain or anything. Just nice and easy, right in her sleep.

Oh, yes—Mrs. Davis from next door was there. She's the one who found you next morning, after that night I left the house. She put some flowers on your coffin, and she was crying real hard. That made me feel pretty bad.

She was crying and saying how she always felt sorry for you. "The poor little thing seemed so unhappy, but to think she would take her own life this way . . ."

I wish you could have seen it, the way she cried. Honest, Ruth, I got a kick out of that.

She didn't talk to me. She never did like me much.

Your sister was there. She didn't talk to me either. She's the one who made all the arrangements, because I just couldn't do it. By the way, I guess you want to know where they're taking you. Well, it's to Hillcrest Cemetery. Isn't that fine? Remember how you mentioned once, when we drove past, how quiet and peaceful it was up there?

Ruth, I won't be able to go to the funeral. I guess I better tell you about that. It makes me feel pretty bad.

It's because of this little guy with grey hair who was at the mortuary. He stood over at the side of the room and kept looking at me, and I don't know—there was something about him. When I started to leave, he came up to me. "It sure is a miracle," he said, "the way they can fix them up. She looks so natural."

I said, "Yes, but look at her hair, they've got her hair fixed different. Can't you tell that?"

"Sure," he said, "but that's all right. She looks almost happy. You're the husband?"

I said, "Yes, I was the husband." I said, "What do you mean, she looks al-

most happy? Please leave me alone. I feel pretty bad."

He said, "Yeah, I thought you were the husband. Where have you been, Mr. Connor? Why did you leave the house that night? I'd like to hear all about it."

I didn't like him, and I said, "Who are you?"

He showed me a badge, and he said, "I wish you'd come uptown with me. A few questions we'd like to ask. Now, now, nothing to worry about. Just routine."

WELL RUTH, I've got to tell you about this. On the way uptown Lieutenant Winter kept remarking what a marvel it was how these morticians could fix you up so that nothing even showed.

"I remember a friend of mine," he said. "A hot-rod racer. He went through a rail and turned over four times, and they say he was really mangled up. Later, when I went to look at him, you couldn't even tell it."

I said, "So what?" I said, "Why don't you shut up, because I feel pretty bad."

He said I didn't look like I felt so bad. I said, well, I did. "They fixed her hair different," I told him. "I don't see why they did that. She never wore it that way."

And right then, Ruth, he gave me a funny look. "A .45 slug through the temple," he said, "leaves a pretty ugly wound. That's what I've been telling you. They sure do fix them up."

Well, Ruth, I guess this will surprise you. That's the first I knew about it. What *really* happened. Here all the time I thought it was the other way. I had no idea you would take that .45 out of the drawer and use it! It was clever, all right. Still, it was just suicide, wasn't it? What could they pin on me?

Well, when we got uptown they took my fingerprints. Winter said it was just routine. Then they put me in a chair and this little guy Winter— Let me tell you about

him. I never liked him, right from the first. Never trusted him. Especially the way he talks. Two others were there, but I didn't mind them. It was this Winter. He sat very close, and his eyes kept boring in on me.

But I was too smart for them. I only told them *part* of it. I told them about when I came home that night, and you were waiting up, and you were mad, Ruth. I never saw you mad very often. I guess you had decided on a showdown. For the first time in all those months you mentioned Elise. That kind of surprised me.

I said, "All right, so you know. I'm glad it's out in the open. What are we going to do about it, Ruth?"

You said, "We?" and gave a funny laugh. Remember? You said, "I still love you, Jim. Heaven help me, but I do. In spite of this. In spite of everything."

That sounded silly to me. I'd been a heel, I told you. Probably always would be. Why should you stick to a guy like me?

I was trying to get it out, and finally I said it. "I don't love you any longer. Ruth, I want a divorce."

I'll never forget your eyes, the way you looked at me. Big and startled eyes, like a sleepwalker. You just kept looking at me; then your eyes got kind of funny. You said real low, "Jim, I won't give you a divorce. You'll never have Elise. I—I'll die before I see you go to her!"

I guess you hated me then. I didn't know what you intended to do. But that's what decided me. I can tell you now, Ruth: I'd been thinking about it for some time. Killing you, I mean.

So when you said you had a splitting headache, I offered to get you some aspirin. Remember? I came out of the bathroom with it, dissolved in a glass of water. I knew that was how you always took it. Only it wasn't aspirin, Ruth. What do you think of that? It was those sleeping things. Barbiturate. I used plenty of them, enough to make it look like suicide. You drank it right down, and you never even guessed.

I went downstairs and I heard you call, "So now you're going back to Elise?" Your voice sounded a bit frantic, but I didn't answer. Is that when you decided, Ruth? Or was it when you heard me leave the house? Anyway, you found the gun in my drawer and you must have used it pretty quick, before those pills began to work. Ruth, I just don't see how you could do a thing like that to me. . . .

WELL, as I was saying, I told Lieutenant Winter all this. All except the part about the sleeping tablets. He has that despicable, prying type of mind, but he didn't get that out of me. It was still suicide, wasn't it? You shot yourself. That suited me fine.

(Continued on page 112)



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"No, Doctor, not that!" It was Fritz's voice, coming from the head in the cabinet.

By WILLIAM L. DAY

CHAPTER ONE

Strange Visitors

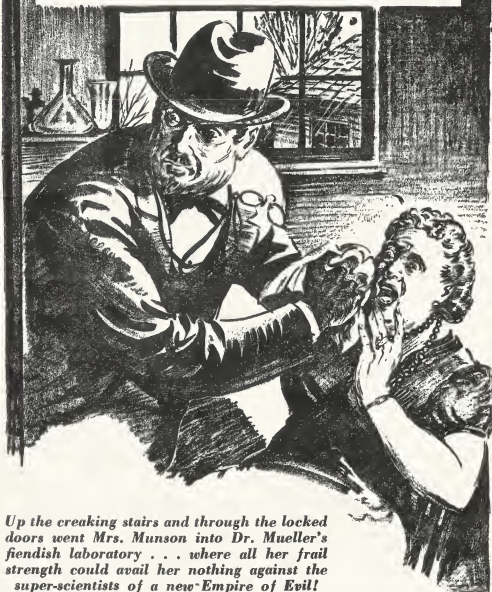
**T**HE MURDER of Fritz Kirstein by his fellow countryman, Dr. Hans Mueller, is not simply the bizarre crime it appeared to be from the accounts

Bizarre  
Mystery Novelette

in the press. Nor was Dr. Mueller the mad scientist he was pictured to be. Dr. Mueller hasn't gone to the chair yet, and perhaps he never will. I suspect he knows



# THE TALKING DEAD



*Up the creaking stairs and through the locked doors went Mrs. Munson into Dr. Mueller's fiendish laboratory . . . where all her frail strength could avail her nothing against the super-scientists of a new Empire of Evil!*

too much, and that the authorities cannot afford to let him die yet.

He can confirm the full story, which I have just heard from Mrs. Munson. Perhaps he will, to save his life.

Mrs. Munson was his landlady. She did not testify at the trial because she was in a sanitarium at the time. Her testimony was not needed and perhaps not even wanted. The police had enough evidence to convict as it was, and Mrs. Prince was able to supply whatever other links were needed.

There were those, of course, who said Mrs. Munson's mind was unsettled by her experience. You may have heard some of the rumors that went around. In justice to her good name, if for no other reason, her story ought to be told.

But there is another good reason, and it fits in with Mrs. Munson's account. I cannot vouch for it personally, but I heard this report from a former Army officer who, in turn, had it from an officer who helped identify Hitler's body.

This report is that Hitler's head was missing. At the time, this was taken as an effort of the Nazis to make final identification impossible. This would have been used to strengthen the legend that Hitler had not died. As will appear, if what Mrs. Munson says is true, this would not be legend at all, but actuality—the actuality, at least, that Hitler's head might continue to live on and direct his plot against the world.

I am informed that the search for the Fuehrer's head still goes on, and the Munson story, which is now known in Washington, spurs that search. I pray it may be found and utterly destroyed, as the head of that arch-Nazi, Fritz Kirsstein, fortunately was destroyed through the courage of Sarah Higgins Munson.

She is a well-known figure in Ellyn Woods. She is a Higgins by birth, and various branches of the Higgins family have lived in that suburb since it was a

crossroads. They say if you stood at the corner of Main and Front forty years ago and shouted "Higgins!" half the town would come running.

THE OLD Munson place is quite close to the center of Ellyn Woods. For some years, Mrs. Munson has lived there alone with Mrs. Prince, her companion and housekeeper. But she is not a recluse. By no means. In fact, for her age—and she must be almost 70—she is one of the most active women in the town.

It is a big house. Upstairs there is a long master bedroom across the front, but Mrs. Munson moved out of this into what had been a guest room ten years ago, after Dr. Munson died. Mrs. Prince sleeps in a downstairs room, the one she has occupied now for thirty years.

The upstairs rear of the house is a series of three rooms which were once the children's rooms—two bedrooms, one leading into the other, and beyond, a large playroom. This is the old original house, before the front part was added on. So there is an extra bathroom back there, between the two bedrooms, and a separate stairway, opening into one bedroom, which leads down to the side door. There are gas and water connections in the playroom where Dick, when he was a boy, had a chemistry lab.

After the war, with the housing shortage, people were always after Mrs. Munson to turn these rooms into a small apartment. She always found an excuse for turning them away. She admits she was selfish about it. She is rather high-strung, and after a session with her grandchildren during the holidays—there are eight of them, Dick's three, Anne's three, and Carol's two—she is exhausted.

And since young married couples in Ellyn Woods are always having children, or already have them, she couldn't see having a couple in the back of her house. Not that she was opposed to people raising

families, but she had raised three of her own, and she felt she had a right to be fussy and obstinate.

So when Dr. Mueller came along, it solved her problem. She had met him when he first visited the United States in 1936. At that time, he was a minor celebrity in psychiatric circles; he had also done some unusual brain surgery, and since the late Dr. Munson was a surgeon, there was a common interest. He must have visited them a few times at Ellyn Woods.

Dr. Mueller's views on the Nazis in 1937 were so vague that Mrs. Munson cannot recall what they were. Her own crowd at that time was far more concerned about Mr. Roosevelt than they were about Herr Hitler.

What Dr. Mueller did in Germany during the war years, Mrs. Munson never asked. The doctor didn't talk about his experiences, and she was too busy with her own affairs to ask prying questions. She congratulated him on having gotten out of Germany after the war, but she did not inquire how he had contrived it.

At any rate, he had a minor position at Ellyn Woods State Hospital. The hospital was short of doctors, and although they could not put him on the staff as a physician, for he was not yet licensed to practice in this country, he did actually serve in a medical capacity.

She took him in without question, then,

when he inquired if he might room there. He said one of the back rooms would be ideal, and that he would like to use the playroom as a laboratory. He wanted to take up his research again, he explained, but it was too difficult at the hospital. Always interruptions, interruptions. And no privacy. After eight years among the Nazis, he dearly craved privacy, he said.

Mrs. Munson understood this. She felt the same way herself, and so she was sure he would not be a troublesome roomer. Mrs. Prince, the lean housekeeper, remarked that it was strange he always kept his rooms locked (he had taken over the entire back suite of three rooms) and that he insisted on cleaning them himself. But Mrs. Prince was an easy-going woman, accustomed to Mrs. Munson's whims, and if the German doctor wanted to make his own bed, sweep, and dust, so much the better for her.

Dr. Mueller had been there a month when Fritz Kirstein turned up. The doctor introduced Fritz to Mrs. Munson and said, "He will be here only a few days, while he finds quarters in the city. Do you mind if he stays with me?"

Fritz was a handsome young Nordic, with blond hair and fair skin, and he revealed strong, white teeth as he smiled at Mrs. Munson. "I hope you do not mind this little request," he said. His voice had a stronger accent than the doctor's. Mrs. Munson, having it put to her

Boy, what a  
**HEADACHE!**  
starting to throb.



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in this way, could hardly refuse, and young Fritz's smile aroused a maternal feeling in her.

"Of course," she found herself saying. "Stay as long as you like."

SHE SAW very little of them, as a matter of fact. They always used the back stairway, which led to the side door, and Mrs. Munson was out much of the time. There were all her relatives, the Higginses, and the Garden club, two bridge clubs, the music club, and the women's club, and of course the church.

When she met either Dr. Mueller or Fritz, they spoke, exchanged a few words, but there was no chit-chat. There was no need for a string of pointless pleasantries such as one would be forced to invent if, for example, you had a school teacher as a roomer. They lived close together, under the same roof, but in different worlds.

They lived so close that sometimes, in the evening before she went to sleep, she could hear their voices through the thin partitions of the house. She could not distinguish the words, and she would not have wanted to, except that they seemed to be arguing. Young Fritz, when she'd seen him lately, had appeared sad and depressed. It had been difficult not to make personal inquiries. He was such a boyish person.

He was coming out of the house one morning when she was up early, busy pulling weeds in her garden before the heat of the day. She called to him. "Mr. Kirstein, will you give me a hand? It will only take a minute."

Fritz came over, and she showed him a gopher trap. "My hands don't have the strength they used to," she said. "Will you set it?"

She showed him how, and he quickly maneuvered the sharp jaws into position. She had already dug a hole for the trap, intersecting a gopher runway, and she

set it in place. "Now we'll get him," she said as she brushed off her hands. "He won't ruin any more lawns."

"Poor little gopher," said Fritz. "For progress, he must die. And without willing it himself."

Mrs. Munson felt no tender emotions for gophers, or for any of the things that preyed on her lawn or her garden, and she was sure Fritz's feelings must really pertain to himself.

"You sound so sad," she said. "Why is it bad for him to die without willing it?"

"When the will is free, one does not mind doing his duty," Fritz said. He was looking off into the distance, and the yellow curls on his head seemed to vibrate in the morning sun. "That is why I am sorry for the gopher. He must die for the sake of progress, but he does not have the freedom to will it for himself."

"Such talk of dying!" clucked Mrs. Munson. She wanted to tell him that life wasn't as serious as it looked, that all trials pass in time, just as do all joys. "The war is over," she added in a matter-of-fact tone. "You must learn to enjoy life each day."

"Life is beautiful here," he admitted. "But I must leave soon. I have my duty."

Mrs. Munson sighed. She too believed in duty, in a general way. So few of the young people did nowadays. She made note of it that here was a young German who believed in duty. Germany really couldn't be so bad, she told herself. Just misled by that absurd madman, Hitler.

"Yes, duty," she sighed. "Well, I must get back to my weeding, I guess."

That was probably the last time she saw Fritz. At least, it was the last time she saw him entire. A friend who had a place in Michigan had been urging her to come up for a week in the summer, and the next day she and Mrs. Prince started out before six o'clock in the old Buick. The tires were uncertain, and they had

a long drive. She was glad there was Dr. Mueller to be in the house, nights.

When she returned, she missed Fritz after a few days. "Where is the young man?" she asked Dr. Mueller. She had waylaid him as he left one morning, by arising early to work in her garden.

"He has gone," Dr. Mueller said. "He found a place in the city."

"He could have stayed here," said Mrs. Munson. "I think he liked it here."

"Yes, he liked it here. But we cannot always do what we like."

Mrs. Munson returned to her weeds. Dr. Mueller hurried to catch the bus out to the state hospital.

But although young Fritz was gone she found herself thinking of him. He had spent a good deal of time around the house, and she had the feeling he was still there.

"I miss that young man," she told Mrs. Prince at breakfast. "We never saw much of him, but I liked having him around. And it's strange, but I have the feeling he's still around."

"He could be," said Mrs. Prince. "He always stayed in the doctor's rooms, and the way the doctor keeps those rooms locked, he might still be there." Mrs. Prince was easy going, but she didn't miss a thing, as they say. "The doctor eats enough for two," she added.

"I thought he ate at the hospital."

"At noon, yes. But I see him bringing food up to his room." They had finished breakfast, and Mrs. Prince began to clear off the dishes. "He must have a gas plate which he uses to cook in his room."

Mrs. Munson remembered the gas bill. It was higher than it was supposed to be, she remembered. She had assumed it was from the bunsen burners in the laboratory-playroom. Well, it made no difference. She was not a professional landlady, running a rooming house, and before she complained of such trifles, she would ask the man to move. At least, he

had no children. And no social life. And he didn't drink. In face, he was almost too perfect a tenant.

"Do we have a key to those rooms?" she asked.

"I suppose there must be one around," said Mrs. Prince. "There are a lot of old keys in the left-hand bottom drawer of your desk. Or I can get a skeleton key at Patch's."

"Oh, no. I wasn't thinking of that. I just thought we ought to locate an extra key. Just in case, you know."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Dr. Mueller's Laboratory

LATER that morning Mrs. Munson rummaged through the keys. Now that she thought about it, she decided it was her duty, unpleasant though it might be, to inspect the doctor's rooms. Heavens, he might have a cage of white mice, and that would never do! She had never allowed Dick to keep mice in the house when he was a youngster, and she wouldn't tolerate the doctor doing it either.

Of course, she could stand on her rights and demand to see the rooms, but she disliked doing things the hard way. She was learning to conserve her energy. Mrs. Prince had left to do the day's shopping, so no one need know that she'd entered the doctor's rooms.

She took an assortment of likely keys, and after trying several of them, found one that would open the first bedroom door. She was almost sure she would find Fritz inside.

But the room was empty. The same key opened the second bedroom, and there was no one there either. Both rooms were neat and clean. There were no grounds for complaint here. But then she noticed the door to the laboratory.

It was locked by a hasp and padlock,

a feature her roomer had added, and without asking her! It was both an affront and a challenge, an affront to the lady of the house and a challenge to her as a hairpin mechanic. It was a cheap lock. She picked at it for several minutes and finally it snapped open. She paused then.

She had a strong feeling she should not go on. The story of Pandora flitted through her mind, but, like Pandora, the forbidden unknown only whetted her curiosity. She removed the padlock and entered the laboratory.

It did not look much different. There was a gas burner, all right, on the laboratory sink, and a small electric refrigerator, and some cooking utensils and other odds and ends. All clean enough. No mice. Not a sign of animal life.

But still that feeling, stronger than ever, of the presence of Fritz, warning her to leave. And a strange hum, which she supposed came from the refrigerator until she stepped over to it.

Then she realized the hum came from a curious large cabinet against the wall of the room. It was as big as a wardrobe, and had probably once served as one. It was painted black. It had a handle and a lock.

She tried the handle. It turned. The door gave. It was not locked.

But this was no business of hers, and she would have left then, except that an overwhelming feeling told her *not* to open the black cabinet—*Don't open it! Get out before the doctor returns!*—so strongly that it tantalized her curiosity. She opened the cabinet.

What she saw caused her to faint.

\* \* \*

When she revived, Dr. Mueller was rubbing her wrists. The cabinet door was shut. "You shouldn't have come in here," he said. "This is no business of yours."

She groaned. "Help me to my feet," she said. She was a big woman. With considerable effort he helped her rise. She

looked at him. "Did I see what I thought I saw in the cabinet?" she asked.

"What did you see?"

"I thought I saw Fritz's head." She was weak again and stumbled to a chair. "Dr. Mueller," she said, "it's fortunate for you I don't have a weak heart, or you would be charged with my murder too. I don't know what I'm going to do about you. I suppose I ought to call the police."

She paused and held out her hand. "Do you have some spirits of ammonia? Smelling salts aren't fashionable, I know, but I need something."

He went to the bathroom and returned with a dampened cloth. He held it to her nose, and she recognized the odor of ether. She was sure he was going to kill her then, and she knew she didn't have the strength to fight. She felt that she might just as well relax and pray that Mrs. Prince would return quickly and sense that something was wrong. He was pressing the cloth close to her now when a voice—not his—spoke.

"No, Doctor, not that!" The voice spoke with the unmistakable accent of Fritz. It was Fritz's voice, but Fritz—She had seen his head in the cabinet, glowing as in life with all its yellow curls, the eyes open and staring at her.

She thought she must be having dreams from the effect of the ether. Oh, Mrs. Prince, Mrs. Prince, come quickly, she prayed. Oh, Martha Prince, why don't you come? A childish refrain ran through her head, "Sister Anne, are they coming, are they coming, Sister Anne?" And in a moment Dr. Bluebeard would be cutting off her head, hanging it in his cabinet, and it would be too late, and he would probably cut off Martha Prince's head, too.

"No, Doctor," the voice was saying, and the doctor had heard the voice. He had taken the rag away.

"Open the door," the voice insisted.

The doctor hesitated.

"Open at once! I am in charge here, Doctor!"

Dr. Mueller opened the cabinet door. Fearfully, Mrs. Munson turned to look. It was still there—the head of young Fritz Kirstein, handsome young Fritz, and his head was alive and speaking, calling her by name.

The shock of the sight was going now. Such things simply could not be, not in the common-sense world of Ellyn Woods, but this had become the world of Sister Anne and Bluebeard, and one must deal with a monster on his own level. But it was not the monster who was talking, it was his victim, poor young Fritz.

"This is an experiment, Mrs. Munson," the head was saying. "I entered into it of my own free will, and I absolve the doctor of any guilt should I die. I want you to go to your room now and rest, and after you have rested the doctor will explain. But you must not speak a word of this to anyone. Do you understand?"

Mrs. Munson managed to nod her head.

"You give your word?" the head continued.

"Give my word," Mrs. Munson said. She took her hand and feebly crossed her heart. "Cross my heart and hope to die," she whispered. Then she began to laugh, screaming peals of laughter that swelled into hysteria. Dr. Mueller quickly drew a needle from his bag and punctured her arm. He helped her back to her room, to the solace of her bed, and the screams died down to whimpers. Then she slept.

WHEN she awoke, it was late afternoon. Mrs. Prince was standing there with a bowl of soup. "Dr. Mueller says you had an attack. Lucky he came home, wasn't it?"

Mrs. Prince's tone, the stress she laid on the word "lucky," indicated she believed it was something more than luck. She wanted an explanation from Mrs. Munson, but she was too proud to ask

questions. She was a woman who prided herself on understanding with a few words or none. She gave her own information, when it was important, in hints only. And she played her game by its rules.

Mrs. Munson said nothing. She tasted the soup.

"Should I call Dr. Fawcett?"

Mrs. Munson shook her head. "It was nothing," she said. "I'm not going to pay out money to old Fawcett just to be told I ought to take it easy and stop working in my garden." She tried to laugh then. "Mrs. Prince, we've got a good doctor in the house. Might as well take advantage of him."

Mrs. Prince pursed her thin lips. Whether or not Dr. Mueller was a good doctor was something on which she would not, at the moment, pass judgment. "Want anything else?" she asked.

"What have you got?"

Mrs. Prince shrugged her shoulders. This might be her cue. Mrs. Munson knew the rules of the game, too. She wasn't coming right out in the open and ask when Mrs. Prince returned home and what the doctor had said and so on. So Mrs. Prince would contrive to tell, spacing out the bits so she could draw something from Mrs. Munson.

"Oh, I bought some lamb at the market," she said. "I could fix it up for you. Good for the heart, they say."

Mrs. Munson shook her head. "You didn't call Dick? Or the girls?"

"He said it wasn't serious. Just a fainting spell, he said."

"No, there's no need to bother the children. I was just a little nervous—and over-tired."

Mrs. Prince drew herself up. "Well, if you don't want nothing else—" she stressed the ungrammatical nothing to make her point—"I'll be getting about my work." She went to the door. There she stopped and turned.

"The neighbors say they heard a



strange noise over here. Sounded like a woman's screams."

"I have lived in this house forty years," said Mrs. Munson, "and in forty years I have yet to teach the neighbors to mind their own business."

"Then there wasn't any screaming?"

"No, there wasn't any screaming. It was me. I was laughing. Dr. Mueller told me a joke. It struck me very funny. Nobody ever tells old ladies that kind of joke and—"

"You don't enjoy them," said Mrs. Prince coldly. She left and started down the stairs.

"Martha!"

Mrs. Prince came back.

"I'm sorry, Martha, but I don't want to talk about it just yet. Please don't worry. I'll be all right, I think. I wonder if you can lend me a hand getting down the stairs."

"Dr. Mueller said you were to stay in bed the rest of the day."

"I don't care what Dr. Mueller said. I don't intend to stay up here alone."

Mrs. Prince helped her down the stairs and onto the front porch, where Mrs. Munson reclined on the swing. "Martha," she said, "I went into the doctor's laboratory. He had mice in there, just as I suspected. One of them got loose. That's why I screamed. And then I fainted. The doctor came in and found me."

"Lucky he came home just then."

"Very lucky for me," said Mrs. Munson.

Mrs. Munson was still sitting on the porch when Dr. Mueller came home. She saw him approaching down the street, and the sight of him both relieved and worried her. She had not expected him to return, and she had been wondering what she would do with the thing she had seen in his laboratory, notify the police, or try to dispose of it herself, quietly, without any scandal.

The sight of him relieved her, because

he looked as stolid and respectable as ever, and she thought it all might be an hallucination. But it worried her, too, for she knew it wasn't a dream or a vision, and she was afraid of him, and it.

He passed her without a glance, going to the side door, and she realized he was afraid to look at her. "Dr. Mueller," she called after him. "Come here. I want to see you."

He retraced his steps and came up on the porch. "You were supposed to stay in bed," he said.

She stood up. "There's nothing wrong with me now," she said. "Just a little weak, that's all. Give me your arm. We're going down to the lawn chairs, where we can talk alone."

He helped her down the stairs and out into the yard. There were three white chairs on the side lawn, and when she was comfortably settled in the largest of them, she said, "Now you go inside and ask Mrs. Prince for some whiskey. She has some there, for medicinal purposes, and you ask her to mix it with some lemonade or iced tea or something. I don't like the taste of whiskey, but I need something. And I don't want the neighbors to think I'm drinking, either. Seems they think enough now."

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Talking Head

WHEN Dr. Mueller returned with a glass of iced tea and whiskey, Mrs. Munson began the speech she had been rehearsing during his absence.

"I'm a broad-minded woman," she said. "I certainly don't hold with the anti-vivisection people, and I'm sure I've always been in favor of medical research. But it seems to me, Dr. Mueller, that you've gone a step too far. I don't know how you've fixed up that—that head so it can talk. But I don't like it. I don't

know what I'm going to do about it. But I can tell you, as sure as my name is Sarah Higgins Munson, something is going to be done."

Dr. Mueller made a noise in his throat. His face had turned white, and she noted a scar on his right cheekbone.

"Well, Doctor, what do you say?"

"I'm in a difficult position, Mrs. Munson. I hope you appreciate that." His fingers drummed on the arm of the chair.

"You should have thought of that before you cut off that young man's head, Doctor. I can understand that you've been through a lot in Germany, under the Nazis, but surely it doesn't lead to such impulses? If I were a timid woman, I would be frightened. As it is, I hardly feel safe with you around. What if you should take a notion to cut off Mrs. Prince's head? Or mine?"

"Mrs. Munson, there would be no point to that, I assure you. You see, I am carrying on a research problem I began in Germany. Fritz Kirstein and I made an agreement—"

"I suppose now you are going to tell me you drew straws to see who would cut off whose head?"

"Not exactly that. It's very difficult to explain." He pulled out a handkerchief and began to mop his face. "If you'll only listen and not interrupt, I'll explain."

"You will explain," she said, "and fully. But first you'll put away that handkerchief. For all I know, you may have another bottle of chloroform or ether concealed on your person."

Dr. Mueller stuffed the handkerchief back into a pocket. "I could have killed you this morning," he said in a low tone. "And I guess I would have, only Fritz prevented me. You heard his voice, and you saw him speak. And it should be obvious to you that I am performing a serious experiment. As the wife of a physician, you should know how difficult it has been, all along, to advance medical

science, to carry on research over the objections of stupid people. There was a time when medical students had to steal bodies from graveyards for their dissections. . . ."

"Yes, and I recall the killers Burke and Haire!"

"And even today," the doctor continued, "there are outcries against the use of animals in the laboratory. As for the use of human specimens, we are restricted to volunteers unless we imitate the Nazis at Dachau or Buchenwald. There, for the first time, medical science made great forward strides, because human subjects were available, in quantity, for experiments. There, to the credit of the Nazis, whom the sentimentalists despise—"

"I am ashamed of you, Dr. Mueller! To attempt to justify such rottenness! And now you are turning my home into a little Buchenwald—is that what you are trying to tell me?"

"No, Mrs. Munson. I'm just trying to explain what obstacles we scientists face. And now that I have a subject, a volunteer for a significant experiment, you must not interrupt. Where would medical science be today if the doctors who conducted the yellow fever experiment in Cuba, on volunteers, were charged with murder when one of those volunteers died?"

"You are making out a good case," she said slowly. "But there is one thing I cannot understand. Why did you start to murder me with that ether this morning?"

He spread his hands in gesture of helplessness. "How can I explain? Except to say that human nature is, at times, rotten, and my first mad thought, when I saw you there and realized what you must be thinking, was self-preservation—that I must get rid of you to protect myself. Can you understand that?"

"No," she said. "I cannot understand that. That is precisely the point. Those

were not the reactions of a scientist. They were the reactions of a murderer."

HE BOWED in a way that suggested he wanted to click his heels, too. "Madame," he said, "I admit it. You are right. But you must not forget I am a German. I have come from Germany where murder was in the air for many years. One could not have survived if he had not developed the instincts of a murderer, the suspicions of a killer. Can't you understand? You have been my refuge here—do not desert me now!"

She thought of her own comfortable security, and tried to compare it to the unknown horrors of Germany under Hitler. Of course, she did not know all of what had gone on there, or what it might do to a man. At her club meetings she had heard of the need for re-education of the Germans. Now she thought she understood that need.

"I see," she said. "At least, I think I do. But the way you talked a few minutes ago—about Dachau and those other horrible places—it frightened and shocked me. You Germans do not make yourselves clear. You are hard to understand."

"We are a misunderstood people, Mrs. Munson. Sometimes I think we do not understand ourselves." He leaned over, his head between his hands.

In the silence that followed, Mrs. Munson tasted her drink for the first time. She shuddered a bit, both at the taste of the whiskey and the thought of all that Dr. Mueller must have been through. Then another thought occurred to her.

"That head is really and truly alive?" she asked. "I can't believe it. Well, I will come to your laboratory this evening to see it. And you can explain what is the nature of your contribution to medical science."

"You ought to rest this evening."

"No, I am coming to the laboratory. I cannot rest until this is settled."

"You have not said anything to anyone? To Mrs. Prince?"

"Doctor, if you have any murderous intentions toward me this evening, be assured that Mrs. Prince will smell them out. I have kept the promise I made, but Mrs. Prince has lived here so long that she doesn't need a diagram in black and white to tell her when something is wrong."

Dr. Mueller rose. "If you insist," he said.

"We are having supper at 6:30," Mrs. Munson continued. "You will have supper with us tonight. You may go in now and wash, and will you be so kind as to tell Mrs. Prince to fix an extra steak for you, and that I hope having supper a little later tonight won't interfere with her plans for the movies this evening."

Dr. Mueller left, and in a few minutes the lean figure of Mrs. Prince came scurrying out of the same side door.

"What makes you think we are having steak?" she demanded. Mrs. Munson sent a sharp look at her, and Mrs. Prince lowered her voice. "Why do you want me to go to the movies?" she asked as she came closer. "Do you think you'll be all right, alone in the house with that man?"

"Listen carefully to what I have to say, Martha. Do you remember the old clothes chute? It used to lead from the playroom to the basement, until I had it sealed up when Dickie fell down it. You will go out this evening as if you were going to the movies. Then walk around the block, up the alley, and come in quietly through the garden, down the cellar steps, and wait below the clothes chute. Probably nothing will happen, but if it does, the clothes chute is right near the fuse box. Pull the big switch, and then go as fast as you can and get help."

"I'll know what to do," said Mrs. Prince. "What's going to happen?"

"Probably nothing. But he's a strange man, and I mean to have it out about those

mice. That's one thing I can't bear."

The dinner, for all of Mrs. Munson's abilities as a hostess, was a strained meal. Mrs. Prince usually ate with her, but tonight Mrs. Prince had exercised her prerogatives as a servant and was eating by herself in the kitchen. Mrs. Munson was happy when the meal was ended.

"We'll take our coffee into the living room," she said. "Then Mrs. Prince can clear and get away to the movies."

"I didn't know Mrs. Prince was a cinema fan."

"This is something special, I believe."

By an effort, Mrs. Munson managed to make her coffee last until Mrs. Prince appeared and announced she was leaving for the movies. "Don't touch the dishes," she said. "They're in the sink, but I'll do them when I get back."

"What's the play?" Dr. Mueller inquired.

"Nothing you'd care about!" snapped the housekeeper.

**A**FTER Mrs. Prince had left, Mrs. Munson apologized for this discourtesy. "But now we're free to go to the laboratory without fear of interruption,"

she added. She closed and locked the front door and followed Dr. Mueller up the stairs.

The same hum came from the big black cabinet, but when the doors were opened, revealing the head of Fritz Kirstein, the eyes were shut.

"He's dead!"

"No, just in a kind of trance."

The doctor began to explain the apparatus to her, a motor than ran a pump to keep the blood supply circulating; others to aerate and purify the blood; a jar feeding a food solution into the blood stream. In principle, it was simple, he said, merely an elaboration of the system that had enabled Dr. Carrell and Lindbergh to keep a heart alive for several months. The Russians had experimented along the same lines with dogs.

"The mechanics of it are ingenious," Mrs. Munson admitted. "But you haven't yet told me why. Simply to prove that a head can be kept alive this way? It seems rather pointless."

"By itself it would be pointless," the doctor said. "But have you not heard how the deaf develop a new sense? Or how acute the hearing of the blind becomes?"



## HOT SPOT MURDER-GO-ROUND

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STORIES

This experiment is an attempt to develop the resources of the human mind, to see what new abilities it will develop by itself, once it is severed from the material connections and associations of the body."

Mrs. Munson nodded her head. It was a ghastly experiment, yet she was beginning to believe it might have its points. But she was growing certain of one thing: Dr. Mueller would have to get it out of her house. The head gave her the shivers. She wouldn't be able to sleep nights. And if it ever came out, how could she face her friends?

"And has it developed any new abilities?" she asked.

"It has," the doctor said. He was getting excited; the scar stood out clearly on his cheek again. "He's in a kind of trance now, I should say. Traveling by brain waves. Far away from us, either sending out his thoughts, or reading the thought of a distant mind. Because space means nothing to the mind. Fritz is like a mental radio set now. Each night we try to see how far he can get. And then he tells me about it."

"What makes you so sure it isn't all his imagination?"

"I can prove it, by the affair today. Why do you suppose I returned home just in time to find you here? Have I ever before returned home in the middle of the day like that? No, never. Today Fritz sent me a message. He told me you were trying to break in. I couldn't leave at once—we were administering an insulin shock treatment to a patient—but I left as soon as I could. Otherwise I would have reached here in time to have spared you your shocking discovery."

Mrs. Munson recalled the way a message had beat into her own mind, warning her not to enter the room, not to open the black cabinet. She began to feel weak again. She sought the comforting support of a chair. Now she wished she hadn't come. She wondered if Fritz could be

reading her mind as she looked around nervously, until she had located the place where the old clothes chute once opened.

The voice of Fritz startled her.

"They have located the head of the Fuehrer, Doctor!" Fritz's tone was full of tension. The eyes were still closed. "The head is being kept frozen, but they are afraid to attempt to bring it back to consciousness. They need your skill."

"Where is he? How shall I get there?" Dr. Mueller had forgotten Mrs. Munson's presence.

"I don't know," Fritz was saying. "I read no thoughts about place. I see nothing to identify the country. No, wait—there are printed signs. Do you have a Spanish dictionary?"

Dr. Mueller looked around the room.

"I have," said Mrs. Munson. "Shall I get it?"

"Yes, at once! Hurry!"

She rose quickly. If only she could get out now! She knew now where Dr. Mueller had learned his skill at keeping heads alive, and that somewhere the head of Hitler was awaiting his skill, awaiting a resurrection that might plunge the world into war again, or worse! And all this was going on in her house!

"Stop her, Doctor!" It was Fritz speaking. "Don't permit her to leave. She cannot be trusted!"

Dr. Mueller seized Mrs. Munson savagely. She beat him back with her fists, and kicked him. Then she threw herself against the wall where the clothes chute used to open and pounded furiously. The doctor had a grip on her throat now, and she had to stop pounding, to try to tear those hands away, those strangling hands of a Nazi murderer, choking her until everything went black.

MRS. PRINCE, meanwhile, had followed instructions. Stationed at the bottom of the clothes chute, she heard the  
(Continued on page 114)

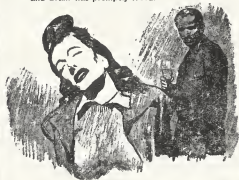
# Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson



Thomas Bram, one of two suspects in a bloody shipboard murder, had served seventeen years of a life sentence and been forgotten by the world, when a mystery story writer used the old files of his case as material for a novel. Try as she might, she could not make Bram come out the killer—the other man, who'd gone free, ran away with the villain's role. The book was a hit, attracted wide attention.

Curious, the authorities checked up on the other suspect's whereabouts. He turned out to be in Sweden, also incarcerated for life, as an incurable homicidal maniac. A bloody hand print, found on the scene of the original crime, but not then admitted as legal evidence, clinched the identification—and Bram was promptly freed!



When the charred body of a murdered man was identified as that of Alex Kels, it looked for a while as though Mrs. Kels might not collect the \$100,000 in life insurance that her mate had carried—not, anyway, till authorities found out who'd killed him, and why. Investigation turned up Kels himself, still alive. He confessed he had killed a wandering hobo, changed clothes with the corpse and burned it—for though he had intended to desert his wife and start life over in Mexico, he hadn't wanted to leave her stripped.

He didn't. When they hanged him at Folsom Prison, the innocent Mrs. Kels got her \$100,000 at last.

In Vienna, little Grete Luner's mother wanted to impress upon her daughter their good fortune in having all the food they needed in a starving world. She hired a housemaid Grete's age, a plump little country girl named Anna Augustin, and fed her solely on raw potato peels and salted milk till Anna was too sick to raise her head. In the dying housemaid's sick room, Grete was forced to wolf down double helpings of wiener schnitzel and apple strudel, nor was she allowed to yield the other girl one morsel.

The lesson came to a point when Anna died of starvation—and Frau Luner was sent to jail for life.



One of the sincerest sermons ever preached was that of the itinerant Reverend Lawrence Hight over the bier of miner Wilford Sweetin. "I am unworthy to preach the sermon over the body of this good man," he said humbly, and he was right—for he had murdered the man himself. No one suspected him till his own wife died the following summer, and autopsies revealed huge quantities of arsenic in both corpses. Hight confessed both murders, explaining that he had fallen in love with the dead miner's wife.



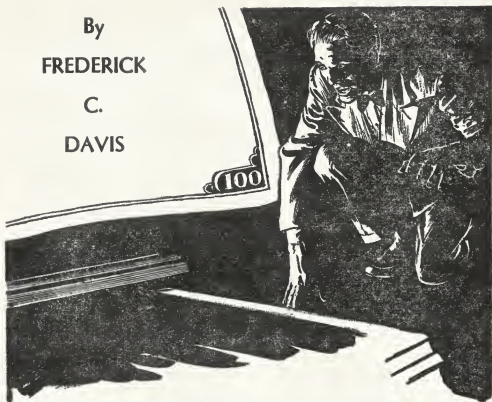


*Who was that lovely creature of  
the night . . . whose soft voice  
and beckoning finger turned  
two reckless gold-seekers into  
despoilers of the grave?*

Startling Novelette  
of the Dead Who Return



By  
FREDERICK  
C.  
DAVIS



A face—a white, desperate face—showed above the open grave. . . .

# LADY OF THE NIGHT

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Mystery Man*

A FRIEND of mine named Van Miller is going around looking plenty worried these days.

The people who know Van best can't understand what's come over him. "He was such a cheerfully realistic, clear-minded guy," they're saying. "Always knew exactly what the score was. Why, it used to be as refreshing as a breath of country air just to be around a guy as wonderfully well adjusted as Van was.

But look at him now. He's turned into a creep."

Looking at him now and shaking their heads, other people are saying, "Yeah, the guy's walking around in a daze, afraid of what he may bump into next. Ask him what time it is and he won't commit himself. He doesn't trust anything any more, not even a sundial. What happened to Van, anyway, to change him like that?

"Whatever it was, it happened while he

was pulling off an extra-fine job of cracking his biggest case," they go on. "No other operator had gotten to first base with that case. Van's bosses were delighted with the way he stepped in and polished it off, pronto. For succeeding so brilliantly where others had failed, they gave him a double-decker boost in pay plus a juicy bonus. Why, Van Miller ought to be the happiest guy in the world. Instead, he's one of the twitchiest. I don't get it."

Well, the change in Van Miller may be baffling to other people, but to me the whole thing is crystal clear. The explanation for it may sound rather peculiar in some ways, but to me it seems perfectly natural, and it runs as follows.

*Time:* 8:30 PM., Wednesday night last month, which was when it began.

*Place:* The branch office of the Acme Indemnity Co., Inc., at 613 State Street, second floor front.

Seated there at the desk, the local manager—me, name of Ned Mooney.

Enter Van Miller.

Seeing him then, you would never dream that in one short week he would become so chronically jittery that he would hesitate to enter his own bedroom if it were dark. He wasn't skittish at all when he first took hold of the Bennerly case. Breezing in that evening, he was his old slightly cocky self, a buoyant, clear-eyed extrovert glowing with inner harmonies.

"Mooney, old man, it's mighty fine seeing you again," he said, with a radiant grin. "Long time since we worked a case together, but this Bennerly affair looks like a really choice one—a fancy caper involving plenty of big dough."

After welcoming him and sincerely assuring him that seeing him again was like a slug of spring tonic, I got right down to business.

"While waiting for you to arrive, Van, I got everything nicely lined up for you. We're going out to Bennerly's place right

now. Let's get rolling without further delay and I'll brief you on the way."

I LOCKED the office door and carefully steered Van around the ladders left in the hallway by a crew of painters. He laughed indulgently at me for that, but naturally I was taking no unnecessary chances. When he was settled beside me in my car I headed out toward the city's lushest residential region. A balmy, moon-silvered evening, just right for our plans, had settled after a red sunset—which, as everyone knows, is a favorable omen.

Our home office in New York had just assigned Van to the Bennerly case and he was eager to take a swing at it, particularly since four other Acme operators had all left it just where they had found it.

"Bennerly's giving another big party tonight," I began, "and we're both invited."

Van frowned at me. "Wait a minute. According to my information, Bennerly was released from the state prison only a couple of months ago. He was sent up six years back for embezzling a quarter-million dollars. The stolen dough was never recovered and Acme Indemnity had to make it good, having bonded Bennerly. Acme is still in the hole for two hundred and fifty thousand bucks, thanks entirely to Bennerly's slick thievery. Right?"

"Positively."

"Acme is still plugging at the case after six futile years, in an effort to get back as much of that missing money as may be left of it. You are Acme's local representative and Bennerly is certainly aware of that. Yet he invites you to a big party. What is this, a colossal piece of brass?"

"Could be," I agreed. "Bennerly knows well enough that we're still smelling around for our dough and that we'll collar him again at the very first whiff. But he seems to enjoy risking it. Maybe he's just the sporting type. Maybe he's making like he has nothing to hide. Anyway, he serves

damn fine liquor and his swimming pool swarms with the tastiest girls in town. I welcome the opportunity to watch him, and them, at close range."

Van gave me a sidewise look.

"You will have a really sharp chance at the case as a result, Van," I added, "because Bennerly doesn't know you're one of Acme's brightest young Hawkshaws. I just asked him would it be okay to bring along a friend this evening, and he said sure, the more the merrier."

Van seemed dubious about this unusual method of attack.

"Just take it as it comes, pal," I went on, "because we're going to hit the jackpot. Bennerly has outwitted us so far, but this time we're going to nail him. According to all the signs, things have taken such a turn for the better that we just can't lose."

"I'm mighty glad to hear that," Van said. "What things? Good, solid, material evidence, I hope."

"Well, last Sunday, out in the park," I told him confidentially, "I picked up a four-leaf clover. The very next day I found a horseshoe right in front of my house. What's more, Mercury is in the ascendant in Pisces, and the last time I had lunch over at the Gypsy Tea Room the palmist said—"

"Good Lord," Van broke in. "Isn't it time you outgrew those childish delusions of yours, Mooney?" He shook his head.

"Next thing, you'll be carrying a rabbit's foot around."

Loosening a button of my shirt, I fondly showed him my newest and most comforting possession, a white rabbit's foot hanging around my neck—the left hind leg of a bunny that had been snagged under the most auspicious circumstances in the dark of the moon. It was gold-mounted, a really beautiful specimen, loaded with all sorts of good fortune to come.

VAN wagged his head. "It's incredible that a grown man in more or less his right mind can believe a rabbit's foot is any good anywhere, except on a rabbit. I hope you'll graduate from the Dark Ages some day, Mooney. I can tell you one thing for sure, in advance—if we solve this case this time it'll be from using our brains and not a crystal ball."

We were tooling along the mile-long yew hedge fronting the Bennerly place. The poplar-bordered driveway wound gracefully to a house blazing with light and buzzing with the sounds of well-bred revelry. Merry music tinkled from multiple loudspeakers inside the mansion and among the moonlit gardens as well. Guests, formal and informal, were prettily clustered here and there or wandering along the flower-edged paths. Waiters in monkey jackets were circulating with trays loaded with Scotch-and-sodas. I had often reflected that if I could have all this in

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**they make good listening too!**

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Heaven I wouldn't mind drinking myself to death tomorrow.

Van, however, looked with a grim eye on all this extravagance. As I steered him into the opulent manse, through baronial hallways and under glittering chandeliers, I could sense him strengthening his resolve that Neil Bennerly would not flaunt such illegal ostentation in Acme's face much longer.

He kept doggedly close to my side while I scouted among the babbling guests for our host and quarry. Our hunt led us out to the pink flagstone terrace adjoining the blue-tiled pool, where we made a fortunate encounter named Doris Moore.

"Evening, Doris, honey. We're looking for Neil. Miss Moore, may I present Mr. Van Miller?" To Van I added the explanation, "Doris is a little odd. I mean she's just what the movies need to pull them out of a box-office slump, but somehow she'd rather go on being Bennerly's secretary."

At the mention of her job a strain crept into Doris' lovely smile. She was wearing a Riviera-type swim suit which left any change of expression clearly visible anywhere on her. Her long, lithe legs remained unchanged in their charming aspect, the perfection of her outlines was not altered, her loose dark hair stayed the same beautiful cloud. Just her luscious raspberry-red mouth grew a little tighter, and a glint like heat lightning on the horizon came into her dark grey eyes.

"When you find Neil, ask him if he won't join me here, darling," Doris said. "If he hasn't anything better to do I thought I might spend a spare moment kicking his teeth in." Apologetically she added to Van, "I wholeheartedly hate the skunk's guts every day in the week, including Sundays and holidays, but I do manage to be ladylike about it except when I'm a little tizzy." She tried that last word again: "Tizzy." On the third try she licked it. "Tipsy."

Then she started drifting off toward the nearest of the six bars in the place, smiling back over one bare shoulder a smile of purest double-distilled venom.

Watching her curvaceous departure, Van said quietly, "That attitude in a girl can be fatal to a man. What accounts for it?"

"Love, of course," I answered. "And frustration. Everybody but Neil Bennerly knows Doris has been more than slightly mad about him for years. It's hard to believe, but she's bucking plenty of stiff competition. For an example, follow me."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Three Loves

ON ANOTHER TERRACE, landscaped like a chunk of lush tropical isle, a blonde young woman stood beautifully statuesque against a background of poinsettias, a few guests gathered around her. Her jewel-bright violet eyes sparkled as she talked and lightly laughed. Her gown was sea-foam, flecked with tiny emeralds, and her naturally golden hair was an artful tumble of ringlets. This was another of the women who had gone for Bennerly in a big way. And as luscious as Doris had appeared a moment ago, she now seemed slightly run-of-the-mill in comparison with the cool, patrician beauty of this one.

"She's Bethia Bennerly, Neil's present wife—his second," I informed Van. "I suspect she's not quite utterly happy with him, either. Come with me and I will point out the reason for this."

Back inside the house I conducted Van down into the rumpus room. Resembling a gold-plated penny arcade, complete with slot machines and juke box, it boasted both a full-fledged soda fountain and a bar that was easily equal to the demands of any night club. The object of my foray was nowhere in the milkshake section, but at

her favorite spot over where the Scotch flowed.

"Wow!" Van said involuntarily.

His was a quite normal first impression of the redhead named Cara Rae, and I was quite sure that his estimation of her would be fully confirmed if he were lucky enough to become personally acquainted with her. Her high cheekbones, her slightly sullen mouth, and her sultry green eyes were a combination outclassing any Hollywood glamor-puss you might name, in or out of technicolor. She possessed, besides, a chassis to match, and hers was a fun-loving nature. The fun she loved best ran mostly to one kind, but I felt reasonably sure she hadn't yet grown bored with it.

"As to what part Cara Rae may play in Bennerly's life," I said to Van, "I leave that to your imagination."

Van's imagination immediately began running a fever. His temperature shot up a few more degrees when Cara's smouldering green eyes turned on him. She didn't see him, though, because she was looking for somebody else—Neil Bennerly, of course—and not patiently. Next a soft sound of keen disappointment came from Van. It was caused when Cara slid off the bar stool and, slender hips flexing in the sheath of her black gown, left the room. Apparently she was looking for Bennerly in a mood that boded him no immediate good.

"On a man having Bennerly's advantages, you see, Van," I remarked, "six years in the clink can be really tough."

Van was thinking as he peered around, "Six years and a quarter of a million bucks—that's more than forty grand a year. Even including having to wait for babes like these, that kind of dough is not bad compensation."

Just then, as Cara Rae faded beautifully out one door, Neil Bennerly himself breezed in another. I grasped the opportunity to introduce Bennerly to the man who, all unknown to him, was becoming

more and more determined to slap him back into the pokey.

Van's reaction to Bennerly was engrossing to watch. He was out to bag this guy for dear old Acme, but Bennerly's easy, unaffected charm was warm enough to soften him up a little. Undoubtedly Bennerly was one of the most personable and genial big-scale embezzlers that Van had ever met socially.

"Place is yours to enjoy, Van," Bennerly assured him sincerely. "Please pardon me for rushing right off like this, but have fun, boys, have fun."

Bennerly then strode back the way he had come, his haste seeming anxious, a glint of harassment in his bold eyes. Taken together, all these various huntings-about looked like a rendezvous about to bloom.

On the scent of it, Van went quietly outside. Bennerly was not now in sight. Circling the house, we caught no glimpse of Cara Rae, either, or of Bethia Bennerly, or even of Doris Moore. There were many possible meeting places out there in the garden, all flower-scented and romantically moonlit, but we could not tell in which direction Neil Bennerly had gone, or with whom. We did, however, feel a sense of crisis in the air—a simmering of trouble between Bennerly and one or more of those luscious women in his life.

"How does he do it?" Van said as we went along a dark path. "And how the hell is he paying for all this? With Acme's dough?"

WE KNEW, from having checked and rechecked sixteen ways, that Bennerly had not squandered away all the dough he had stolen six years ago. We were certain, in fact, that he had cached away the biggest part of it before the law nailed him. We hadn't been able to smell it out of hiding while Bennerly remained in prison, and now that he was out on parole we'd been looking for him to make some move, out of sheer necessity, that might betray its

whereabouts. So far, though, Bennerly had done nothing of the sort and was still neatly outfoxing us.

"A bit of local snooping on my part shows that he is doing all this on the cuff," I answered Van. "Since getting back from the clink he has been living high on a series of loans from friends. This is something we should be glad to know because it means he will sooner or later be forced to dig into his sock for some of Acme's missing money. Then, when he does, we'll grab it."

Van answered with a grim nod, these being his sentiments exactly. We were moving quietly along one of the darkest and most secluded paths on the estate, doggedly seeking out the moment's secret rendezvous between Bennerly and one of his fair women. Realizing suddenly where Van was leading us, I grasped his arm to stop him.

"They're probably not in there," I said, indicating a stone gate in the gloom just ahead. "That's a little private cemetery. Generations of Bennerlys lie moldering there. The latest was Annys Bennerly, Neil's first wife, just six years ago. Did you hear what happened to Annys?"

"She must've died, didn't she?" Van said.

"She did, indeed, and under suspicious circumstances. Her body was found inside one of the Bennerly Caddys, inside a closed garage, with the motor running. It could have been caused by fatal carelessness, but more likely it was suicide or murder. The D.A. tried hard but just couldn't get close enough to Bennerly with a homicide charge."

"As a high-class crook he is not only charming as hell, but versatile too," Van remarked.

"Annys' death came just before Bennerly's embezzlement was discovered. Somehow I've always had a hunch that Annys was one who knew where Bennerly had

hidden the dough. Maybe he bumped her because he was afraid she might blab, but if so nobody will ever prove it now."

Van said thoughtfully, "I seem to remember you had another strong hunch that he had hidden the cash inside Annys' coffin."

I nodded. "We arrested him right after the funeral. Then, because he wouldn't even talk about the missing money, we got an exhumation order. Annys' casket seemed the best place in the world for him to have ditched the dough. Then too late I realized we were opening the grave on a Friday the thirteenth. Besides, Saturn must have been in the descendant in Taurus or something. Anyway, we didn't find one damn cent inside Annys' casket."

Van had alertly lifted his head. Now he said in an urgent whisper, "Be quiet!"

In moving noiselessly back along the path from the little private graveyard we had come within earshot of a whispered conversation. It was occurring only several yards away, behind a thick screen formed by a bank of hibiscus. One of the low voices was Neil Bennerly's and the other was that of a woman. Their exchange of words was tense and passionate—his growled and hers hissed.

We could understand nothing of what they had said until Bennerly blurted, "No, I won't!" and the woman answered in a toneless breath, "Oh, how I loathe you for that, how I detest you!"

With an angry gesture Bennerly went striding across the dark lawn, back toward the house. The woman seemed not to move; there was no sound from her now. She was so silent, in fact, that we thought she had slipped away.

Van eased forward, craning, sure we'd lost her but still trying to spot her. He was hoping, of course, that this might be an opening for us. As he eased through the bushes I heard him murmur, "She's gone." Then he suddenly froze with the awareness that a woman was right there,

close at his side, standing in shadow.

"I loathe him, too," this one said in a barely audible voice. "I detest him even more than she does."

There had not been just one woman here at this spot, but two. The first, who had been quarreling with Bennerly, actually had slipped off a moment ago. The other, the one speaking now, had evidently trailed Bennerly to this rendezvous and had eavesdropped on the other. The situation was complicated and certainly dangerous for Bennerly. To have one woman loathing him and loving him simultaneously was risky enough, but he had at least two of them doing it, and possibly three.

The woman standing near Van said in bitter breathlessness, "I know why you're here—and I'm going to help you."

Van stared at her—or rather at the spot where her whisper came from. Also staring, I felt her presence there without seeing anything but the dimmest details. There was a suggestion of hair glimmering in the darkness, a faint glistening of wide-open eyes, and the sound of quick, hot breathing—but nothing really recognizable. All we knew was that this was a woman full of malice for Neil Bennerly.

Van asked quietly, "Can you tell us where to look?"

She whispered, "Where to find the money he stole, you mean? Yes, I can tell you that—and I will. But not tonight. I want to make sure, first—absolutely sure of destroying that rat. So wait until you hear from me—then come back."

Van reached out to grasp her arm. He wanted to hold her there, to press the information from her right then. But she was already darting away. The bushes rustled, we glimpsed a shadow figure running and heard quick footfalls fading across the grass. She disappeared into the far-away tinkling of the loudspeakers and the laughter of Bennerly's guests.

"That's it, Van!" I said excitedly. "That's exactly the sort of thing that'll

crack this case wide open for us—a woman's jealousy. That babe is really loaded to her pretty ears with it, too. But which one of those luscious lasses was she?"

Answering in a baffled manner as he peered in the direction she had disappeared, Van said, "Damned if I know!"

THE STRAIN of waiting for the tipoff began to wear on us early. From that moment on, Van and I hardly dared move out of reach of a phone. The female tipster was taking her time and it was rough on the nerves. After a full day of feverishly pacing my office floor Van was as restless as a race horse hitched to a milk wagon.

"The hell with this," he decided. "This is no way to investigate a case. Acme isn't paying me to sit around and wait for some vindictive woman to drop the answer right into my lap, all wrapped as a gift. I'm going out after it."

He did, and for days worked quietly and hard. Making no headway, he plugged at it harder and still made none. He began muttering to himself. He grew baggy under the eyes from lack of sleep because he was keeping himself awake nights for fear of missing that phone call when it came. As one trying day crept after another it became fairly clear to me that regardless of Van's fine talents as a special dick, and regardless of how much the fact might hurt his pride, the tip we were waiting for was our best bet, if not our only hope.

"Give yourself more credit, Van," I said. "After all, not one of those women ever felt like blabbing to me in all the six years I've known 'em. But no sooner do you show up than one of them begins breathing secrets into your ear. Even if it wasn't brainwork, it must be your irresistible charm that's turning the trick, or something."

He didn't even hear me.

At noon that fourth day—first making sure that my stenographer would stay



right there at my phone every minute—I went hunting for Van and found him alone at a small table in the grill of the Hotel Hutton, staring at an untouched beer and sandwich.

"This is a hell of a dull place to eat," I said. "All they got here is food and drink. How about coming over to the Gypsy Tea Room with me? Maybe you'll be more *en rapport* than I've been these past few days."

"The answer to this case will not be found in the random shape of a few tea leaves," Van explained patiently. "Don't be silly."

"Well, it's true they've sort of let me down over there," I admitted. "Every day I've hoped they could tell me whether it's a brunette like Doris Moore who's taken a hand in this case, or a blonde like Bethia Bennerly, or a redhead like Cara Rae—but they don't seem to be able to dope out which."

Van looked exasperated. "Of course not. I've done my damndest—not using legerdemaine, but common sense and realistic methods—to find out that very thing. I've worked on all three of those women separately, trying to find out whether it's Doris who's crossing him up, or Bethia, or Cara. But whichever it is, she's being as wily and double-faced about it as a spiteful woman can be."

"Which is why you're almost ready to blow your top, strictly from frustration," I said. "I hope you haven't gone and broken any mirrors lately, because otherwise our chances still seem pretty good."

Van looked pained. "That senseless superstition about broken mirrors began back in the dark days when people were foolish enough to imagine that the reflection in the glass had something to do with our souls—but let's avoid such childish nonsense, Mooney. The cold fact is that one of those captivating creatures in Bennerly's life really intends to destroy him, all right—but secretly. Doris and Bethia

and Cara all kept their pretty faces perfectly straight when I talked with them, with never a single hint dropped as to which is the one who intends to push him into the chopper."

"We got to go on waiting for the right one to tip us, then. Meanwhile I got a red-hot idea, a way of cracking the case fast."

Van listened with interest, nodding as I went on, "Remember, we already know a lot of places that dough ain't. For example, we've made sure it isn't in a safe-deposit box anywhere, and we didn't find any hidden panels in Bennerly's house. I still think the money must be buried somewhere on the grounds. Well, what we should do is take a forked twig—a divining rod, see, like they use for water-witching—"

Van groaned. "Please. Very likely this case is going to be solved for us by a self-appointed female stool pigeon. But definitely it will never be decided by any such absurd hocus-pocus as that."

"Maybe you're right," I answered, sliding a finger inside my shirt to stroke my new gold-mounted rabbit's foot, "but just the same, a little black magic right now wouldn't hurt us any."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Dark Lady

THEN it came at last—the call, the tip we'd been waiting for.

It was after dark on the fourth evening following the party at Bennerly's place. Van and I were alone in my office. When the phone rang I was busy at my desk, drawing up a new horoscope, which was shaping up very favorably. Before I could even start reaching, the phone was in Van's fist. I let him keep it and slid across to the extension on my secretary's desk in time to hear a low female voice.

"I think you know what this call means, Mr. Miller."

Van said tightly, "Yes." I could hear music in the distance. It was coming over the wire with a peculiar echoing quality that I had previously noticed around Bennerly's swimming pool. This meant, of course, that we were connected with one of Bennerly's extensions. The whispering voice still carried a quality of tense bitterness that meant Bennerly's number was definitely up.

"We'll wait no longer now," the whispered message went on. "Meet me in the garden—that same spot, soon. I'll have news for you."

Then with a quiet click the faint music and the whisper stopped.

Van and I gave each other a this-is-it look, then started out together, hustling. In my car we headed straight for the Bennerly place. Van might be skeptical about hunches, but I felt in my bones that tonight we really would hit the jackpot.

This time we buzzed past Bennerly's gateway to a spot far down the hedge where the shadows were deep. Leaving the car there, we eased through the yews and quietly crossed the velvet lawn toward the house.

Another social function was in progress tonight. Peering across a terrace, we saw Neil and Bethia Bennerly seated with sixteen or eighteen guests at a table draped with lace and sparkling with crystal and silver. Among the guests were Doris Moore and Cara Rae.

Possibly this formal dinner was the first occasion since the big drinking party to bring these three women together. If so, it was slick figuring on the part of the dame who was doing the double-crossing because it would help to cover her.

At a high pitch of eager tension, Van and I faded back across the grounds to the dark spot where our meeting with the woman had occurred the other night. It was secluded, surrounded by heady hibiscus, and dark. The moon was low, the whole night hushed. As we waited there

in silence, I gently stroked my new rabbit's foot and felt more and more that this was indeed the payoff night.

I had anticipated a long wait. But no. Apparently having found an early opportunity to slip out of the house, the woman was there almost before we'd expected her. She came near us in the darkness, again the same indefinite form, resolute yet furtively careful of betraying her identity. Van almost stopped breathing, and I began swallowing lumps as she stood there between us.

"All right, honey," Van said softly. "Let's have it."

Whispering, she said, "In the grave—Annys' grave."

A groan of disappointment broke from Van. "But no, darling. That's no good. We looked in Annys' grave years ago and the money definitely is not there."

Her whispering answer came, "But you didn't look far enough. The money is not inside the casket with Annys, but it is in her grave—*under* the coffin."

Startled stiff, Van and I tried to stare at each other in the darkness. It was such a simple twist, so shrewd and so possible. Hardly daring to believe it, we turned our eyes back to the woman—and didn't see her. Instead we caught the rustling sounds of her quick departure. She was slipping away again through the darkness, and in another moment she was gone.

"Who was it?" I asked quickly. "You were closer than me, facing her. Get a better look at her this time?"

"Yes, but I still can't say which one she was," Van answered. "Never mind that angle now. We're checking on her information pronto."

"Okay. Listen." I was tugging at Van's sleeve. "If we're careful we can do it without getting another exhumation order and maybe grab Bennerly by surprise. Just follow me."

I led Van back, around the house to the garage. Easing into the tool shed adjoin-

ing, I came out with a shovel and a wrecking bar. Moving faster then, we followed the path to the private cemetery.

ANNYS BENNERLY'S grave, I recalled, was located in a corner near the gate. We struck matches and saw her name engraved in the great marble slab. In no mood to waste time, Van at once began prying at the slab with his iron bar. I worked at his side, opening a crack, then sliding the slab back inch by inch. We tried to make no noise that might attract attention from the house but we couldn't avoid an occasional *chunk* or a ringing *cling*.

Striking more matches, we looked into a black hollow beneath the slab. This grave had been constructed in the semblance of an underground tomb; the casket lay in an oblong hollow lined and floored with flagstone.

We slid down into thick air. Although there was scarcely room for our feet, we squirmed and struggled with the handles of Annys coffin until we somehow managed to heave it up on one end. Such was our anxious urgency, we didn't take time to notice whether we had stood Annys on her feet or her head. We were conscious of a slight bony rattle inside but paid as little attention as possible to it.

I kept match flames going constantly while Van chopped at the flagstone floor of the grave with the wrecking bar. One of the stones soon cracked. Widening the hole was comparatively fast work. Van drove the pointed end of his bar deep into the blackish clay underneath. It struck something hard and his blows quickened. Next he dropped down, scooped loose earth away and uncovered with his hands something that looked like a pickle crock with an earthenware lid.

This was it, all right. We knew at first glance that this was the end of our six-year-long rainbow. Our unknown female tipster was dead right—this had to be the

dough that Bennerly had kept so closely cached. Van bought some of it up in his hands beaming with grim satisfaction—bundles of banknotes wrapped in oilskin, with more of them cramming the crock full.

Then we froze. Van's widened eyes turned up through the flickering light of the match in my fingers. We saw something moving just above the lip of the open grave. A face, a white, desperate face—Neil Bennerly's.

Suddenly it was gone. We could hear a solid-sounding thump-thump as Bennerly's feet pounded out of the cemetery. Evidently our noises had warned him of the danger of discovery, and now—

Was he bent on escape? Suspecting that this was what his fast retreat meant, Van scrambled out of the grave, pausing just long enough to give me a hand up to his side. We ran through darkness in the direction of Bennerly's noises and saw him against the house lights—a dark figure rushing. We were not far behind him when he pushed into the house through a side entrance near the blue-tiled pool.

We pressed after him—pushed in the door just as he snapped on a desk lamp. In its green glow Bennerly stood still, bent over his desk, an automatic in one fist, his eyes burning at us.

This was his study, complete with fat, leather-upholstered chairs and walls lined with good books. His desk was so placed beside the broad casement windows that he could watch the lissome lasses frisking about the pool. The strained, bitter set of his face now meant that he realized these delightful days were all gone. His best hope now was to knock off a couple of indemnity dicks fast, grab the dough out of its earthy hiding place, and make a dash for the tall timber.

"Please let's be quiet about this, boys," Bennerly said. "Since I really do have to murder you, I'd rather not disturb my guests with it."

Van and I both moved at the same time to dodge out of the line of fire. The fact that Van dodged to the left and I scrambled to the right, served to confuse Bennerly. For half a second he couldn't make up his mind which of us to kill first. Then he decided, for some reason, that I should be the one. I dived for the corner behind one of those big leather chairs and at the same time Van, making the most of Bennerly's bad choice, reached inside his coat for his own gun.

What followed was loud, violent, and deadly.

It stopped suddenly, and a moment of ringing silence followed. I raised my head from behind my morocco-covered barricade to find Bennerly slowly sitting himself down in his chair. There was a hole in his starched shirt-front directly under his black bow tie. He closed his eyes and his head lolled forward as if he were falling asleep. He was not dead and he wasn't going to die quite yet, but he was definitely through having fun for a while.

Outside the study there were little female cries of alarm and sounds of running. An inner door suddenly went wide open. Three women pressed into the room and stopped short, side by side, with guests craning behind them, all staring at Bennerly. From left to right the toothsome trio were Doris Moore, Bethia Bennerly, and Cara Rae.

For one intense moment Van and I watched their beautiful faces. They grasped at once what had happened to Bennerly. But we saw no flash of fulfilled vengeance in the eyes of any of them. We saw no slyly triumphant curve of their red lips. There was not the slightest betrayal of guilt visible in any of them. They all looked sickened and sad, as if they had known all along that this would happen to him some day.

Gently, Van pushed them backward out of the room and closed the door. I peered

into his face, searching for an answer. Did he know now which one was the woman who had settled a score with Bennerly? Bethia, the wife who hated him because she knew he was two-timing her with Cara? Cara, who hated him because he wouldn't divorce Bethia in order to marry her? Or Doris, who hated him because he had always brushed her off in preference to the others? Did Van know now which one?

He shook his head at me, frowning in thought.

"But you said you got a better look at her this time, out there in the garden," I said. "If you can't say right now which one it was, you'll never know."

He answered, "I can't quite figure it. That woman out there in the garden wasn't quite like any of those three. Somehow—" Then a look of startled enlightenment flooded over his face. "It really wasn't any of the three. Instead, it was *this* one right here!"

He strode to Bennerly's desk and pointed to the silver-framed photograph of a smiling woman.

"That's the one who tipped us!" he said.

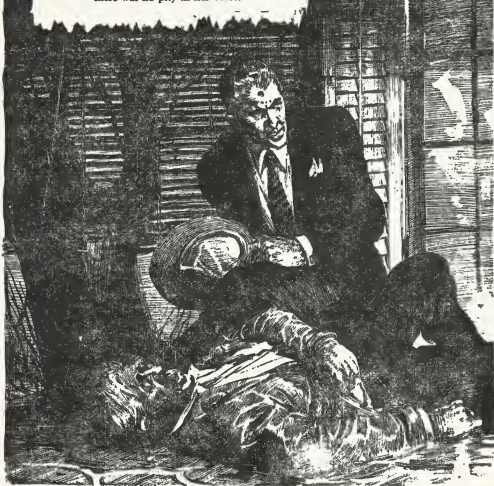
"Sure of that, Van?" I asked him.

"I'm positive!"

"That makes it very interesting," I said. "Because that is Bennerly's first wife, Annys—the woman he probably murdered six years ago, the one whose grave we just opened. . . ."

**W**ELL, all this is the reason why Van Miller is going around looking like a haunted man these days. He can't believe it really happened to him, but at the same time he can't doubt it, either. I'm afraid the poor guy will go on vainly hunting for the right answer all the rest of his life. What's more, he's doomed never to find it in this world—not anywhere this side of his own grave.

"He must have suffered," Alice Penney said. But there was no pity in her voice.

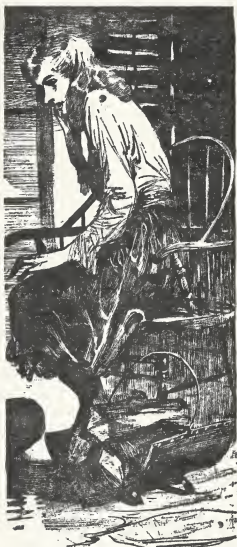


## CHAPTER ONE

### Master of Pain

THE MASTER was wearing white tonight, a robe of some silky, sleek material that reflected the dim lights of the small auditorium, a material that seemed to change in sheen and color with the Master's graceful body movements. He was a tall man, and thin, with fair hair and the complexion of an infant. He had the coldest blue eyes Joe had ever seen.

This was the damnedest town for cults, Joe thought. And this was the damnedest cult of them all. His glance moved around the walls of the dimly lighted room, seeing the symbolic murals there, the serpent that writhed (pictorially) the length of three walls, the emaciated lambs and triumphant rooster, the signs of the zodiac, Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, and the rest.



*What strange fascination drew those worshipers to the Shrine of Sorrow . . . where nightly the lesson of pain was taught . . . and daily the red hand of murder struck among its members?*

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# **BLOOD for the MURDER MASTER!**

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By  
**WILLIAM  
CAMPBELL  
GAULT**

## **Macabre Murder Novel**

His glance moved from the walls to the people. There were all kinds of people there, men and women, young and old, in forty-dollar, off-the-shelf suits and home-made dresses, in custom suitings and Hattie Carnegie originals.

Different, all of them, but attracted to the same cult for some reason as yet undefined.

And there was Joe—Joe Welkin, pri-

vate eye, and he knew why he was here. He was here earning his twenty-five a day and all he could load on the swindle sheet.

The Master was talking about deliberate pain. He was extolling its virtues as a sanctifying force on the soul. A ritual, the Master lamented, that had almost vanished with the years, that had withered under the commercial, money-seeking fever of the age. But a ritual known

and practiced, he said, by the devout.

The words were euphonious and rhythmic, lulling the senses, settling a peace on the audience. The Master, Calerno, had worked with words for years.

A brazier was on the platform with him, a vessel of engraved and tarnished brass, holding a heap of burning coals. There was nothing else up there with Calerno, and the effect of the white robe against the plain black velvet backdrop had a hypnotic effect.

Silence in the room, all eyes straining toward the brazier and the man in white, the expectation of what was about to happen holding them all tensely. A faint odor in the room of the burning coals, a watching silence in the room.

**F**AITH, Calerno was saying, would work miracles. "I am about to prove the truth of my assertions in a demonstration that should convince even the most skeptical of those here tonight. I want to warn you that this is not done in any sensational attempt at trickery but is an earnest display of the power faith has given me."

And now the Master's left hand was extended, palm downward, over the glowing brazier.

There was a gasp from his audience, and a feminine sob. But no one looked away; all watched eagerly, and Joe Welkin decided he knew what the common magnet was for this varied group.

There was another odor in the air now, the odor of burning flesh—and then the Master raised his hand high, displaying the palm. It was blackened, with red streaks running horizontally along its length. The red was the red of flesh exposed by a cracked skin.

A sigh in the room, all eyes forward, on the Master, as though waiting for a visible reaction to the pain he must have felt. There was no reaction on the serene face. He talked on, of triumph over

worldly ills . . . the ecstasy of the spirit.

From the open doorways at the rear of the hall came the sound of falling rain now, and a lovely red-headed girl went quietly along the rear aisle, closing the doors.

The Master's voice couldn't compete with the girl, not for Joe. She wore a pale green robe too, which indicated she was a member of the Inner Coterie.

All of the devout present had a chance, through faith and effort, to attain the Inner Coterie. Joe could see now that belonging to that select circle had certain definite advantages.

They were taking up the collection, three men of the lesser lights among the select, all dressed in tan robes, all evidently sincere, pious men.

Joe's glance went down to the front row, to a girl in pale blue linen, a girl with fair hair and a mobile, interesting face. Alice Penney, her name was, and she was the reason for Joe's being here, though Alice wasn't aware of it. A lovely, vivacious girl, this Alice, and papa had more money than Alice had admirers.

The collection box was in front of Joe now, and he dropped a dollar into it with the careless abandon of a man on an expense account.

There was an organ playing softly from somewhere, limpid, thin melodies like half-forgotten memories. The redhead was on the platform consulting with Calerno, while another of the Inner Coterie removed the brazier. In the front row, Alice seemed to be having an argument with her escort, a bulky, sport-coated lad with a broad, tanned face.

His name was Greg Rittnauer, Joe knew, and he had once played a lot of halfback for U.C.L.A. He hadn't done so well with the Rams, and he was, as they say, currently at liberty.

Which was no reflection on the lad, for the Rams were loaded this year. Joe had met him once at a party and hadn't



been able to work up either an active liking or dislike for the youth.

On the platform, the redhead was anointing the hand of the Master with oil from a vessel, and the Master was staring straight ahead as though in some other world.

Then the girl stepped aside, the Master's palm was again lifted, exposed to the crowd, and it was whole again, unblemished.

The audience gasped, as before. The organ reached a sort of minor crescendo, holding a sustained note. Then there was silence.

The voices of the pair in the front row were suddenly audible in the quiet. "Trick" was one of the words that rang out, not as an accusation against the Master, but in the dialogue with the girl.

Calerno smiled down on the pair benignly, and his voice was soft. "You are skeptical, sir?"

All eyes were suddenly on Greg Rittnauer, and he rose belligerently. "I am not doubting your faith. I was just explaining to Miss Penney that it's a trick anyone could master with a little practice."

"Oh." Calerno's blue eyes grew cold. "Would you like to try it?"

**THE WIDE HEAD** lifted pugnaciously, as though Calerno were an opposing and troublesome tackle. "I wouldn't be afraid to."

"Without faith?" Calerno shook his head. "I couldn't permit it."

"That," said Rittnauer, "is what I was explaining to Miss Penney." There was a smugness in his voice, and he turned to face the crowd before seating himself again.

If he thought he'd achieved the doubtful victory of the last word, he underestimated Enrico Calerno.

The Master's soft voice came down quietly from the stage, the scorn in it

hardly evident. "I will permit you to try. I will ask that you cease the experiment as soon as you realize its danger." Calerno's blue eyes moved out over the heads of the audience. "It is not my purpose to cause pain to anyone. But we live in a world that demands proof, and we will give it to them."

Young Rittnauer had risen and was walking toward the stage. The murmuring of the audience grew; there was an air of restless anticipation.

Joe thought, The young fool. The adolescent jerk. I ought to stop him. He's let that girl and this bunch of gullible goops trick him into taking a foolish risk. Damn that Calerno!

But nobody was paying him to guard the welfare of Greg Rittnauer, and nobody was likely to.

The brazier was being brought out again. It seemed, to Joe's skeptical eye, to be glowing a bit more fiercely than before. On the stage, Rittnauer turned to face the audience, and then his gaze dropped to the girl in the front row.

She was leaning forward. From where Joe sat, there didn't seem to be any fear in her face or any undue concern. There was a sort of expectancy there, and Joe didn't watch for any more. He looked again at the stage.

Rittnauer kept his eyes on the girl. He pushed the sleeve of his jacket back, unbuttoned the shirt cuff, and shoved that high, too.

Then, his eyes never leaving Alice's face, he extended the palm of his right hand directly over the red coals.

Joe didn't watch him for a few seconds; he surveyed the room instead, watching the faces of the group, noting the eagerness with which they absorbed this spectacle. Then his eyes went back to the stage.

Greg Rittnauer was perspiring now, and the tanned face looked pale. His hand remained steady, though, over the coals.

His hand was as close as the Master's had been, and the heat was greater, if anything.

Joe felt sick. He wanted to stop this ridiculous spectacle, but he held his peace. If Rittnauer had learned nothing but football at the university, that was his lack, not Joe's.

Then, suddenly, Rittnauer jerked his hand away, and for a moment he swayed, holding his injured hand in the other, breathing heavily.

Calerno came over to support him, but Rittnauer pushed him away. Defiantly, the youth glared back at the crowd, his chin jutting belligerently, as though daring them to laugh.

Nobody obliged, and he walked quickly off the stage and up the aisle toward the door. In her front row seat, Alice Penney watched him go but made no move to follow him.

The Master was saying, "I regret this unfortunate incident exceedingly, but the young man doubted my faith."

The door closed behind the broad back of Greg Rittnauer, and something like a sigh rippled through the audience. The organ took up its thin melody again, then stopped as the Master raised his hand.

"We have in our group tonight a man who spent two years in a Japanese prison camp. He has volunteered to speak on the lessons of pain, and to disclose some of the astounding revelations that came to him during this fateful period of his life."

The Master beckoned, and a thin, shabbily dressed man came up the steps onto the platform. He limped, and one shoulder seemed considerably lower than the other.

The man was introduced as George Platt, and he spoke in a nasal, uncultivated voice for nearly half an hour. He told of the beatings he had received from the guards, of the blows that finally reduced him to a sort of semi-conscious state. It was during this period that he

entered what he called "Happyland," in which there were no grief or worry, nothing but a sort of placid ecstasy. He'd had visions too beautiful for his limited vocabulary to describe of a sort of green, warm and tranquil land populated with happy and beautiful people.

"It was as real as the life I'm living now," he explained. "I know lots of people will figure I was punchy, but I wasn't, not any more than I am now. It was the beatings that done it, and it was my reward for taking those beatings without squawking. Like I told Mr. Calerno, it's suffering that'll take us to the happy land. We got to deny ourselves and suffer."

That completed the program of entertainment for the evening, but the crowd did not disperse. The chairs were pushed back, and everybody became neighborly.

The man next to Joe said, "Don't remember seeing you here before. This your first visit?"

He was a middle-aged man with a weather-beaten, narrow face and dark brown eyes.

JOE nodded. "But it's not going to be the last. That Calerno is a good speaker, isn't he?"

"He sure is. Makes a lot of sense, too. Smashed up my leg when I was young, and let me tell you, I was in pain. But it taught me a lot. Yes, sir, I wish we could all break a leg when we're young like that. You learn about humility that way." He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered Joe one. "You in business here, Mr. —"

"Wilkin," Joe supplied, which was only a one letter lie. "J. Clark Wilkin's my name. No, I'm originally from Iowa, but I'm sort of taking it easy now."

"Carruthers is my name," the man said. "Ned Carruthers." They shook hands solemnly. Then Carruthers said, "Quite a few folks here from Iowa. Guess the town's full of 'em. Like to meet 'em?"

Joe smiled genially. "I'd like to meet Calerno. I'd like to shake his hand."

"I can fix that," Carruthers said. "Come along." He rose.

Joe came along, and presently they were in a knot of people around the great one. Carruthers said, "Got a new convert for you, Mr. Calerno. Shake hands with J. Clark Wilkin from Iowa."

The hand the Master extended was smooth and firm, and unexpectedly strong. "Welcome to the faith," the Master said. "You're in business here, Mr. Wilkin?" "Not yet," Joe said. "I'm looking around for something substantial, though. I can afford to wait until the right thing comes along."

Interest showed in the cold, blue eyes, and the Master beckoned to the redhead, who stood near. "This is one of my most devoted adherents, Mr. Wilkin, Miss Rita Boyd."

"A pleasure, Miss Boyd," Joe said, which was an understatement.

Rita Boyd, like the Master, extended her hand and said, "Welcome to the faith, Mr. Wilkin."

Joe held the hand as long as propriety allowed, and looked deeply into the green, appraising eyes. There was interest, too, in these eyes. At thirty-six, Joe had a virility many women liked. This one might, too.

"Your first visit, Mr. Wilkin?"

They were apart from the others, he suddenly realized. They were alone, and here were a pair of chairs. "My first visit," he admitted. "I was certainly impressed."

Rita Boyd was smiling now. "Were you, *really*?"

Joe mulled that one over while he studied her. There'd been some mockery in her tone; there was some malice in her smile. "Shouldn't I be?" he asked finally.

"That's beside the point," she answered. "I don't think you were. You believe it's a lot of hokum."

He grinned at her. "And you? What do you believe?"

"I'm one of the Inner Coterie. Have you a cigarette?"

Joe extended his pack, and she took one. While he held a light for her, she said, "I've seen you somewhere, I know that. You were pointed out to me."

Joe changed the subject. "I wonder about that boy who made the test. He could be seriously burned."

She shrugged. "He's a boy, as you say. But no child."

Joe said, "Mr. Calerno is right-handed, isn't he?"

The green eyes were alert, studying him. "That's right. Why?"

"He made the test with his left hand."

"So?"

Joe smiled. "So, you didn't want me to be impressed, did you?"

Her face showed displeasure. "You're not indirect by nature, Mr. Wilkin. Why don't you come to the point?"

"I was trying to figure the gimmick," Joe said calmly. "I realize he uses his right hand for gesturing while he speaks. So, if that was painted up to look as if it were burned, it would be noticed before he went through the fire routine. He daubs up the left hand instead. He keeps the palm hidden until after the test. That's it, isn't it?"

She didn't answer him. Instead, she said, "I know you now. You're Joe Welkin. You're the man who cleaned up that Dillingham mess. You're a private detective."

"A good guess."

"Playing Hawkshaw tonight, Mr. Welkin?"

He shook his head. "It's a hobby of mine. I collect cults. I belong to a number of them."

The green eyes were thoughtful. "Don't talk like that around Calerno, will you? He's a completely sincere man, Mr. Welkin."

"All right, I won't," Joe rose. "Well, I'll have to be getting along. I'll see you again, I hope?"

The mocking smile was back. "I don't know of any law against it. Keep your guard up, Hawkshaw."

"I'll do that," Joe answered, and then he was walking up the aisle toward the door.

At the door, he turned, to spot the Penney girl. She was still in the group around Calerno.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Dead on Arrival

THE RAIN had stopped, but the threat of it still hung in the moist, cool air. Joe's coupe was parked about a quarter-block down, commanding a view of the building entrance. He went down there to wait.

There wasn't too much, Joe reflected, that the police could do about an organization like this. They posed as a religious group, and unless they were disproven in that claim, they enjoyed the tolerance the constitution affords religious groups. Anyway, they weren't in this instance any concern of the L.A. police, as the hall was in Santa Monica. The faithful came from Los Angeles principally, though. Joe wondered how much information on the outfit was available at headquarters.

That redhead wasn't being fooled; Joe would wager she hadn't been fooled since she was six. How many others of the Inner Coterie were on the up-and-up he had no way of knowing.

He lighted a cigarette and turned on the car radio, keeping a watch on the doorway.

About fifteen minutes after he'd taken up his vigil, he saw young Greg Rittnauer enter the building, his right hand white with bandages. That Penney girl had him, all the way. A man could take a lot of

punishment for anything as luscious as her, Joe thought.

It was nearly midnight when Greg reappeared. Alice Penney was with him, and they climbed into her convertible, which was parked in front of the building.

Joe gave them a full block start before following. The big, light-topped convertible was an easy car to tail.

It turned west on Wilshire and continued all the way to Ocean Avenue, where it turned south. About a block and a half down Ocean, the convertible stopped.

They left the car there and went over to sit on one of the benches on the bluff overlooking the yacht basin. The moon was free of clouds at the moment and sent its shimmering reflection along the water below them.

This must be love, Joe thought. They don't even see the No Parking sign. This was the part of his trade that was most boring. He turned on the radio again and hoped for rain.

It came more quickly than he expected it, a sudden gust of wind and water that deluged the windshield and rattled on the coupe roof. Ahead of him, Rittnauer and the Penney girl were dashing for the convertible.

A few seconds later, the big car swung in a U-turn and headed north. In front of the Alcazar, it stopped, and Rittnauer got out. Joe saw him lean over the door on the driver's side for his good-night kiss, and then the convertible gunned down the street.

Joe followed it all the way home.

Before going to bed that night he reviewed what he'd learned and decided that most of it wasn't data for a report. Carter Penney wasn't asking for a *character* report; he probably knew his own daughter too well to need that. But the business of Rittnauer's hand might make an interesting item, along with the story of the Master.

The last thing he thought of before dropping off was the redhead, and that might have been why he dreamed about her.

THE OFFICE of Carter Penney was a modest place on the third floor of the Algoma Building. Carter Penney was an attorney, but even if he hadn't been he would still have been solvent. His had been a wealthy family.

He was a tall, broad man with a rugged, plain face and a deep voice. He said, "Well, Mr. Welkin?"

Joe gave him the details of the night before, with the exception of his own dialogue with Carruthers. He said, "That assistant of Calerno's, a Miss Rita Boyd, recognized me. I didn't take the trouble to deny the recognition, and I don't know if it'll get back to your daughter or not." He paused. "If it does, she might suspect me."

Penney had thin lips, and now they were almost a straight line. He shook his head grimly. "What the hell kind of an outfit is this cult?"

Joe said carefully, "It seems to have an attraction for one of the worst elements in all of us."

Penney paused for just a second before asking, "And what is that?"

"Sadism," Joe said. "About all they seemed to deal with last night was pain, pain, pain. It kind of sickened me for a while."

Penney nodded, as though it was no surprise to him. His eyes were directed downward toward the top of his desk. "I'm familiar with the . . . vice. But I didn't want to suspect my daughter of anything like that, of course."

He shook his head, then looked up. "I want you to stay with this, Mr. Welkin. I want my girl protected as well as she can be from people of his sort."

"You could insist that she stay away from them, couldn't you?"

Penney said heavily, "Yes, I could. And lose my daughter. Stay with it, Mr. Welkin. I'm very well pleased with your vigilance."

"Thank you," Joe said. "I'll try to maintain it."

Penney was again staring thoughtfully at his desk top when Joe left.

He had some time to kill; Alice Penney wouldn't be up much before noon. He drove out to the building on Sixth Avenue.

The front door was wide open, and there was a black Cadillac parked in front of the entrance. Joe parked behind it and went up the steps to the open door.

The organ was playing, but there was only one person in the auditorium. Enrico Calerno sat in one of the chairs in the front row, his head bowed, one hand covering his eyes.

Joe stood in the open doorway in hesitation for a moment, then walked quietly down the aisle. When he was a full fifteen feet away Calerno turned.

The Master said, "I've been expecting you."

Joe couldn't think of anything to say to that.

"I sensed your attitude last night," Calerno went on, "and when Miss Boyd informed me you were a detective, it confirmed my intuition."

"My attitude?" Joe said. He took a chair near Calerno.

The other man nodded. "You're a skeptic, Mr. Welkin. You're here to bring me trouble."

The organ was still playing softly. The cold blue eyes seemed to be examining Joe's soul. Joe felt an unreasonable chill. He said, "Not today. Trouble's my business, but it's curiosity that brought me here today. That display of yours last night really puzzled me. I wondered if I guessed it right."

"If you want to think it was a trick, if you want to believe the explanation you

offered Miss Boyd last night, you're free to do so, Mr. Welkin. What we can't accept on faith we try to explain with logic, however twisted. I have no explanations to offer. I have nothing but my faith and the power developed by that faith."

There was sincerity in the Master's low-pitched, intense voice. But Joe had heard the same sincerity in politicians' voices. He said, "You're expecting a lot of faith from a newcomer. You're expecting me to believe that fire doesn't hurt and that a little oil will repair a cracked skin."

"All I'm expecting from you is your departure," the Master said coldly. "You disturbed my meditations, Mr. Welkin."

Joe shrugged, and rose. "Okay. Give my love to Miss Boyd."

The organ had stopped now, and the redhead was coming down from the side of the stage. "Did I hear my name mentioned?"

**S**HE WAS wearing a sweater and skirt this morning. She looked even more attractive than she had in the robe. She said to the Master, "Why don't you turn this skeptic over to me, Enrico? I'm sure I could show him the light."

But the Master had withdrawn to his inner world. His head was again bowed in thought, his right hand over his eyes, his right elbow resting on his knee.

Joe grinned at Rita Boyd. "I've a little time this morning, if you'd like to try the conversion."

"Over a drink?"

"Or a sandwich."

She looked once more at Enrico Calerno, then accompanied Joe up the aisle. She seemed unnaturally thoughtful.

When they were in the car, she said, "I've been getting the creeps, in there. That Calerno . . ."

Joe couldn't suppress a smile. "A chaser, huh?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that." She tilted

her head to look up at him. "He's beginning to believe in himself. He's beginning to think he's something special after all."

"Delusions," Joe said, and started the motor.

"Maybe. But the strangest part is he's got me believing him, about halfway."

"Been with him long?"

She chuckled. "All right, so I'm a bad, bad girl. No, I haven't been with him long. I haven't been in this kind of work before, either. I'm not nearly as lethal as you seem to think me, Snoop Welkin."

Joe swung over to Seventh. "I know," he said. "You're just a small-time innocent from West Overshoe, Indiana, and you won a beauty contest in your home town, and—"

"Oh, quiet. I'm a big-town girl, and I've been on my own since I was sixteen. But all that doesn't prevent my being frightened by Enrico Calerno, I'll tell you that, Tough Guy."

Joe's glance was startled. "Easy, Red. I didn't mean to stir up all that. You can tell me about it over a drink."

"I don't want a drink," she said. "I want something to eat."

"Okay, I know a place in Westwood where we can get some thin pancakes. You like those?"

"I like any food that's free," she said, "or doesn't put me under obligation."

There was no further dialogue as they took Wilshire east. As they turned left on Westwood Boulevard, she said, "This is where I'd like to live; this is my idea of a swell place."

"It's just dandy—if you've got the money," Joe agreed.

"I'll get the money," she said quietly.

Which was her story, Joe reflected, in four words. Her biography—and possibly her epitaph.

More details came out, though, as they ate.

She'd taught school and modeled. She'd done some advertising copy work and

written a soap opera that didn't click. She'd met Calerno at a party, here in Westwood.

"He impressed me. At first, anyway. And where else can I get an even hundred a week for wearing a green robe?"

Joe agreed that was easy money. He remarked, "Strange man, Calerno."

"Yes. But he's a different man since he's fallen for that Penney wench."

"Don't know her," Joe said easily. "Was she there last night?"

"Mmm, yes, that blonde with the gleam. The one whose boy friend created the commotion."

"Oh, yes," Joe said. "I remember her now. How about the boy? Seen him since he burned his hand?"

Rita nodded. "He came back. He took the girl home." She frowned. "Look, Hawkshaw, Enrico does pay me, you know. I don't want any more questions from you, not at these prices. And it's not very flattering to be taken to lunch just so you can complete your case against my boss."

"I've no case against him," Joe told her. "I'm just interested in that gang. But I've got to get back to work now."

They didn't talk much on the way back. But when Joe dropped her off he said, "I'll be seeing you again. And if things get out of hand, Rita, I want you to know I'm your friend. You can call on me."

"Thanks, Joe," she said. "There's a chance . . ." She shrugged and smiled. "I'll remember you said that."

\* \* \*

The Penney home was off San Vicente near the Brentwood Country Club district, and Joe was parked in the neighborhood about fifteen minutes later. Three hours later he was still parked there. No car had left the Penney driveway and none had entered.

Fifteen minutes after that a man came

along the walk, a man who walked with a limp and who carried one shoulder higher than the other. It was the survivor of the Japanese prison camp, the man Joe had heard speaking the night before at the meeting, George Platt.

He paused there, before the grandeur of the Penney home and grounds, and then he limped slowly up the winding concrete drive.

Joe knew Carter Penney wasn't home, and it was reasonable to expect the man hadn't come to visit the servants. Which would mean he was here to see Alice Penney, and Joe wondered if she had summoned him.

He was still trying to figure it out when he heard the scream.

It came from the direction of the Penney home, and Joe left the coupe to go sprinting up the driveway.

There was a wide, awning-covered terrace along the front of the house. George Platt was on that terrace, sprawled limply in front of the door.

The person who'd screamed, a maid, stood in the open doorway, staring stupidly down at the quiet body. Then Alice Penney pushed past her and stood there, over the body of George Platt, also looking down.

There was no fright in that mobile face, only a sort of fascinated interest. Like a new student looking through a microscope, Joe thought.

She was looking at him now. "He's dead, isn't he?" she asked.

"I don't know," Joe said roughly. "Call the police. Tell them what's happened." He bent over the body.

From the horrible grimace on the face of George Platt, it seemed almost certain he had died in a convulsion. The face was mottled; the staring eyes still held the memory of pain.

Above him, the voice of Alice Penney said softly, "He must have suffered." There was no pity in the voice.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Red-Headed Lure

SERGEANT CHOPKO was a bulky, brown-eyed man with thin hair and a round, unlined face. He sat in the Penney study, off the living room, staring at Joe.

Joe was giving him what he knew about George Platt, which was very little. Near the front windows, Carter Penney sat quietly in a huge leather chair. There were only the three of them in the room.

When Joe had finished, the sergeant said, "Strychnine, the Doc tells me. Fast stuff. He couldn't have walked for long, say half an hour, outside."

"But why would he come here?" Carter Penney asked. "Alice didn't know him; she saw him for the first time last night."

"If we knew that," Chopko said, "we'd probably know why he died." He rose. "I'm going over to check where he lived. Want to come along, Joe?"

Joe nodded, and looked at Carter Penney. Penney said, "I'll keep her home this afternoon. Pick it up again tonight. I'm not sure I can keep her cooped up too long."

Out on the terrace, Chopko said, "That daughter rubs me the wrong way. Am I getting sensitive, or is she punchy?"

"She's punchy, all right, Mike. All of them who go to this cult are sort of half punchy. This Platt was no model of normalcy, either." He blew out his breath wearily. "Sometimes I wish I were back with the department."

"I'll bet you do," Chopko said. "I'll bet you just hate to work for these *poor* people."

\* \* \*

Platt had lived in a rooming house on Vista, a weather-stained stucco monstrosity that had once been a private home.

His room was on the third floor, in the rear.

It contained two chairs, a cream-colored iron bedstead, and an ancient birds-eye maple bureau. There were two worn suits in the closet and two extra pair of trousers. There was nothing of interest in any of the pockets of these garments.

In one of the small drawers of the dresser, they found some clippings from the *Examiner*, along with a picture of George. It was the story of his experience in the camp.

There were some shirts and socks and shorts in the other drawers. A half-filled bottle of whiskey stood on top of the bureau, along with a thick tumbler.

Chopko looked at that as though in indecision, and then looked at Joe. "I'd better take it along," he said, "for the lab."

"Sure," Joe said. "You don't need my permission."

"Oh, shut up," Chopko said. "Well, there's not much here. I wonder if he didn't have some folks. We'd better see the landlady."

The landlady was a thin, sour woman, a spinster. "He didn't have no folks I know of," she told them. "Though I guess if he did, they wouldn't be too quick to admit it. He was a queer one, I tell you, him and his experiences."

"He had a job?" Chopko asked.

"Not a regular one. He used to clean up that hall over there on Adams, that one where they have the wrestling matches. But that was only once or twice a week, and he didn't make his rent that way."

"You wouldn't know," Chopko said, "how he did make it?"

"No," she said, "I wouldn't. He was way behind until yesterday. Yesterday, he paid me right up to date." She looked at them both suspiciously. "What's happened to him?"

"He's dead," Chopko said.



She stared at them for some seconds before saying, "Well, I'm glad he's paid up."

Outside, Joe said, "You meet the nicest people . . ."

"Let's go over to this hoodoo joint," Chopko said. "Unless you'd like to stay under cover."

"They know I'm a detective."

"Hmm," Chopko said. Then, "That Penney dame. She sticks in my craw. You guess that time right, between his walking up the drive and the scream? There's no angle, there, you think?"

"It doesn't make sense," Joe answered. "He couldn't have been poisoned there. And the person who poisoned him probably had no idea he'd get that far. He must have had an unusual tolerance for the stuff, or—" He stopped.

"Or what," Chopko asked irritably.

"Maybe suicide," Joe said. "Maybe he had the stuff on him and took it while he was walking up the drive."

Chopko nodded thoughtfully. "It makes as much sense as the rest of it." Then he shook his head. "In that case there'd be a bottle or some kind of container on him." Again he paused. "Well, we'll have the grounds checked."

THE DOOR to the auditorium was still open, and the organ was again playing. But what surprised Joe was the fact Enrico Calerno still sat in the same meditative position he had assumed some hours before.

In the doorway Chopko paused, his glance puzzled as it took in the murals, the black velvet drapes, the man in the front row. Then they were walking down the aisle.

When they were directly in front of him, Calerno looked up. His ice-blue eyes considered them for a moment, and then he said, "I knew you would bring nothing but trouble, Welkin."

"He brought me," Joe answered. "You

seem to be expecting trouble, Calerno."

Calerno ignored him as he eyes went to Chopko questioningly.

"I'm checking on a man named George Platt," Chopko said, "a man who gave a talk here last night."

Calerno nodded.

"He worked for you?"

Calerno shook his head. "He gave a talk here. He was interested in the movement."

"You paid him for the talk?"

"Are you a detective, Mr. . . .?"

Chopko displayed his shield. "From homicide. Sergeant Chopko's the name. This Platt came into some money we're trying to check, Mr. Calerno."

"I paid him for his talk," Calerno said quietly. "I paid him a hundred dollars."

"A hundred dollars *just* for the talk?"

Calerno didn't answer that. Instead, he said, "You're out of your jurisdiction, aren't you, Sergeant?"

"The man was killed within my jurisdiction," Chopko answered. "In any event, he died there, in Westwood. I can arrange things with the Santa Monica department, if you don't want to cooperate, Calerno."

The organ had stopped playing now, and Chopko's words were harsh and loud.

Calerno studied him without fear. "I paid him a hundred dollars just for the talk." He sighed. "Miss Boyd brought him to my attention. Perhaps you had better question *her*."

From the side of the stage, Rita said, "Question me regarding what, Enrico?" She was pale. Her gaze went fearfully from Chopko to Joe and back.

"Regarding George Platt," Chopko said. "You knew him?"

"I read about him and mentioned it to Mr. Calerno. I had the impression Mr. Calerno recognized him when I showed him the newspaper item."

She didn't look at the Master while she said this. Her face was taut, the green

eyes less fearful than belligerent now.

Chopko smiled and looked at Calerno. Calerno said, "I was mistaken. I thought he was someone else at first."

He was lying, Joe thought. He was trying to implicate Rita, for some reason. They must have had some words since the morning.

Rita stared at the Master, and there was a speculative look in her eyes. She asked Joe, "Has something happened to George Platt?"

Joe nodded. "He's dead. He died of poisoning."

"How recently?" Calerno asked.

"This afternoon."

"Both Miss Boyd and I have been here since morning, with the exception of the time Miss Boyd was with Mr. Welkin. He can tell you about that. I was here alone all the time they were gone."

"That was before noon," Joe told Chopko. He looked at Rita, then away. Rita and Calerno were each other's alibis, he reflected. Either or both could be lying.

Chopko didn't take his eyes from Calerno. "We've established this much: Platt was working for you, if only for last night. He must have had something he wanted to tell Miss Penney. It wouldn't be too far-fetched a guess to assume he might have wanted to tell her something about you."

"It would still be a guess," Calerno answered. "I didn't kill him, Sergeant. I didn't have anything to do with his death."

They left a few minutes later, and Chopko drove Joe back to his car. There, he said, "You get anything on this. Welkin, you know where to bring it. This is department business from here in."

"Sure," Joe said. The sergeant was in a bad humor.

Chopko went in to check the driveway as Joe went back to his car. It was time for supper, but he hadn't been at his office all day. He decided to go there and

see if there was anything in the mail.

There were some ads and some bills, one check for services rendered. He put the check in his wallet, the bills in a drawer, the ads in the waste-paper basket.

HE SAT there for minutes, smoking, trying to make a pattern out of the day's event, or of the previous night's. There wasn't anything but guesses to go on. And it really wasn't his concern—his job was to guard Alice Penney. He didn't feel that it was his job to guard her from the law, however.

He phoned the Penney home and got her father.

Carter Penney said, "We haven't even started to eat yet. She'll be here another two hours, minimum." A pause. "What about this Platt business?"

"Nothing new that I know of," Joe told him. "Maybe, though, it would be wise to keep Miss Penney at home."

"There's nothing I can do about that," Penny said. "I haven't even the recourse of other fathers; all of Alice's money is in her own name. She doesn't need me, you see."

Joe had scarcely replaced the receiver when the phone rang. It was Rita. She said, "I'm hungry again."

Beneath the bantering lightness of her remark, Joe sensed a tension, an urgency. He said, "I'll pick you up in five minutes."

"Fine," she said, "but will you make it the corner south of us here? I don't want the boss to see you pick me up."

She was standing there, a green gabardine topcoat over one arm, when he drove up a few minutes later.

"Same place but different food?" Joe suggested.

"Right, but Dutch treat, Joe. I don't ask people to take me to dinner."

Joe ignored that. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm not quite that handsome."

What did you want to tell me, Red?"

She was lighting a cigarette. She expelled a mouthful of smoke, staring straight ahead. "I wanted to tell you that I've been a fool."

Joe said nothing.

"What's worse, I was becoming a fraud, a phony. I've never been that, Joe. I've had ambition burning me, I know, but I had some ethics until I got mixed up with—with him."

"So?" Joe said.

"So, Calerno knew George Platt, you can believe. They were old buddies. Why, Calerno even had me writing some more speeches for George. We were going to make a big thing out of him. And then Calerno tells that detective—" She shook her head. "That Chopko looks sleepy, I know, but I don't want any trouble with that kind of cop. He's one of those bulldogs, isn't he?"

"More or less," Joe agreed. "So it's not conscience that has you scared, it's Chopko?"

She didn't answer that for seconds. When she did, her voice was little more than a whisper. "I suppose I had that coming."

They drove three more blocks in silence, and Joe said, "No, you didn't. Try to excuse that one, will you, Red? What's his angle on Alice Penney?"

"That's who you're working for, Joe? Alice Penney's father?"

He nodded. "If I didn't trust you, Red, I wouldn't tell you that. Maybe you could sort of twist that into an apology for the other crack."

She chuckled. She said, "I think his original angle was some musty gag with a crystal ball or a seance for what few hundred he could pick up. I think his angle now is marriage, Joe."

Joe took his eyes from the road to stare at her. "You think she'd sail for that—that freak?"

"Very easily. You don't see him with a

woman's eyes, Joe. And in this state, you know, the husband owns half of his wife's wealth, just as she automatically comes into half of his. What better setup would he want?"

It made sense. But still . . . Joe said, "She's a strange girl, but maybe Calerno would understand her, know how to handle her."

"Offhand," Rita said, "I can't think of anything Calerno doesn't know."

"And maybe Platt had a change of conscience. Maybe he was going to warn her about Calerno. But Calerno's clear. He couldn't poison Platt by hypnosis or telepathy. Calerno's clear on that murder, if it was murder."

"Don't be too sure," Rita said dully. "Don't ever be too sure about him."

They had arrived now. Joe stopped the coupe. In the seat beside him, Rita looked up and asked, "Why do I feel so good when I'm with you? You're no Tyrone Power, that's for sure."

"Just my unseen charms," Joe said, and he bent his head to kiss her.

It was as fine as he'd dreamed it would be. Smooth, soft, warm lips. . . . She pulled away finally. She said, "Just for that, it won't be Dutch treat."

THEY had steaks. They were expensive, but worth it, Joe figured. "And besides," Joe said, "you're really helping me protect the Penney lassie. I don't need much larceny in my thinking to consider this a legitimate expense."

She smiled at him. Her hand on the table was trembling.

Joe covered it with his. "What is it?"

"I don't want to go back, Joe. Not tonight. I can't turn down the hundred a week. I'm not that honest, yet. But I don't want to go back tonight."

Joe thought of the night's chore ahead and hesitated.

"We wouldn't have to spend any money," she said. "I can get tickets for

some broadcasts, if you want to go in."

"It's not that," Joe said. "Please stop treating me as though I'm on relief. It's not that at all. It's because I'm on a case."

"Oh," she said, and sipped her coffee.

Joe very carefully put half a spoon of sugar in his. When he lifted the cup to his lips, his glance met hers. He put the cup down again. "You don't have to cry."

"I'm not."

"But you look like you're going to."

She sipped her coffee, saying nothing.

"Oh, all right," Joe said, "you can go along. It probably will be very tiresome and boring, and you'll be fed up after the first few hours. But you can go along."

"Can I go home and change, first? I've been wearing this sweater all day, and the skirt, too. Could I kind of half get dressed up? It's really our first date, in a way."

He looked at his watch. "We've got exactly one hour. Can you do all those things in a hurry?"

She nodded. "You time me."

It took her twenty-three minutes, by Joe's watch. It took eighteen more to drive over to the big home off San Vicente. And it took twelve minutes of waiting before they saw the big convertible wheeling out of the drive.

Joe gave it two blocks, and then the coupe moved after it. They followed it all the way to the Alcazar Hotel, and Joe went past, to park a block away. He kept his eyes on the convertible's headlights; they were moving again within three minutes. He had his face turned toward the curb as the big car moved past their parking spot.

"That halfback's with her again," Rita said. "What a beating he takes."

"No worse than he'd get from the Cardinals or the Packers," Joe said. "He's old enough to know his mind."

"What I like about you," Rita said, "is your sympathetic, humane attitude."

"It's one of my strongest points," Joe admitted.

The convertible was moving fast, and Joe kept one eye on his rear-view mirror, expecting a squad car at any moment. Right off Washington Boulevard, in Culver City, the convertible pulled up to the curb.

There was a large neon sign visible above the convertible. "Ricci's Rendezvous" the sign read. The Penney girl and Rittnauer left the car and disappeared under the faded, striped awning over the entrance.

Joe looked at Rita. "We'll have to go in. Keep those green eyes of yours under control. It looks like the kind of place where anything can happen."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Séance

RICCI'S was a larger place than its front indicated. The dance floor was rectangular and large. There was room for three rows of tables between the dance floor and the booths that lined the walls. A narrow bar opened off this room, near the entrance.

It was a dim place, smoky, with the music of a four-piece jump band blasting the murky air at the moment. A greasy man in a shiny tuxedo came up to them. "Just two?"

"Just two," Joe said. "We left the kids at home."

The man appraised them scornfully and led the way to a small table near a corner of the floor. The room, Joe saw, was more than three-quarters filled. And the night was young.

So, he noticed, were most of the *Rendezvous'* clientele, though there was a sprinkling of rather jaded gents in their thirties. The table at which they were seated was no more than fifteen feet away from that of the couple they'd followed.

Rita said, "That Rittnauer lad doesn't look happy, does he? From where I sit, I'd say she was needling him."

"Maybe it's the spot," Joe said. "With her money, I can't figure this den."

Rita said suddenly, "Lordy, she's noticed me. What'll I do, Joe? She's coming over."

"Just be your sweet self," Joe said, and rose, as Alice Penney approached the table. Back at her table, Greg Rittnauer was plainly sulking.

"Rita, dear," Alice said, "of all places to run into you."

Rita's smile was purely mechanical. "Miss Penney, Mr. Wilkin. J. Clark Wilkin from Iowa."

Joe winced.

Alice Penney's frank gaze was steady on Joe's. "Papa's boy," she said, and smiled. "It's *Welkin*, isn't it, Rita? It's not *Wilkin*."

Rita said easily, "If it is, there'll be some explanations forthcoming, Mr. Wilkin."

Both of them were looking at Joe now. Joe said, "I do my best. Maybe I'm not as bright as I should be." His glance searched Alice's pallid face, watching for the reaction.

"It doesn't matter," she said finally. "But why don't we all sit at our table? There's plenty of room, and Greg's bad company tonight."

Rita looked at Joe, and Joe nodded.

The orchestra had started up again as they all went over to join Rittnauer.

He didn't look happy to see them.

Alice said, "This is the private detective who was at the house today, Greg. Now will you stop worrying about me?"

There was insolence on Greg Rittnauer's young face. "You working for Calerno, Mr. Welkin?"

Joe shook his head.

Greg looked meaningfully at Rita, and Joe said, "Just friends. Just a mutual attraction that doesn't extend to Calerno."

"I wish he were here," Alice said, "He's fascinating, don't you think, Mr. Welkin?"

"Very interesting," Joe admitted. He wondered at the poise of this girl who'd seen death not six hours before. If it had had any effect on her, it wasn't visible now.

Rittnauer said, "What have they got on the murder? They put Calerno in the clink yet?"

"He's pretty well covered," Joe answered. "And anyway, murder hasn't been established yet."

Alice Penney said, "I thought— What else could it be?"

"Suicide."

Her eyes glowed. "It could be, couldn't it? He would be able to do that. But why there—at my front door?"

"I don't know," Joe said. "I noticed last night how he kept looking at you, as though he'd seen you before, as though he couldn't remember where. He seemed . . . tormented."

Rita coughed, and her mocking green eyes smiled at Joe. But her face was composed. Joe ignored her.

The blonde was all interest now. "What do you think it meant?"

"Maybe Calerno can contact him," Rittnauer said scornfully. "We could have another séance, and maybe Calerno would ask him."

"We could, couldn't we?" Alice said. She turned to Greg. "That's the first good idea you've had in months. Why don't you phone him and see if he will?"

Rita said, "Forget it, Alice." Her voice was sharp.

The band was playing again, but more reasonably now, a soft, insistent melody with a leisurely rhythm.

Alice said, "You dance, Mr. Welkin? I'm sure Greg and Rita wouldn't mind."

Malice, Joe thought, watching Greg's reaction. "I dance," he said, "after my fashion." He rose.

GREG was glaring and Rita was lighting a cigarette as Joe and Alice left the table. When they were out of earshot, she said, "You mustn't mind my lack of modesty. Greg's so jealous, and I don't know of any other way to cure him."

"You could stop giving him cause for jealousy," Joe suggested.

She shook her head emphatically. "That wouldn't be fun."

There were three non-jump numbers in a row, and they danced them all. Joe thought that Alice danced a little close for really adequate footwork, but that may have been because Greg was watching. Her cheek was close to his, her eyes closed.

She said, "Why don't you phone Calerno? Or ask Rita to? I'd be grateful. And you might be surprised. He's an amazing man."

"I'm afraid," Joe said, "that I haven't the proper persuasive power. Why don't you phone him?"

"All right," she said, "after the floor show. We don't want to miss this floor show."

Greg had no comment as they returned to the table. Rita's eyes didn't meet Joe's. She was toying with her drink and looking explosive.

There wasn't much to the floor show. There was an M.C. who mangled some old jokes, and a singer who had graduated from hog-calling contests. Then there was Ahmed.

Ahmed was introduced as "the human pin-cushion." He was a thin, dark man, with a turban, an ornate robe, and an enigmatic smile.

Ahmed stuck pins in his hands and needles in his cheeks. Most of the time, Joe watched Alice. Her eyes were glowing softly.

"How did he do it?" she asked, when the act was over.

"Trickery," Greg Rittnauer said. "I've seen boys do it at smokers. They slide the pins in under the skin layer."

Rita looked relieved at the explanations, Alice disappointed. Then Alice said, "I have to make a phone call."

Greg started to say something, then evidently decided against it. Rita looked at Joe, appeal in her green eyes, but Joe said nothing.

When Alice had left, there was a silence for a moment. Then Greg said, "You always dance that close to your partner, Mr. Welkin?"

Joe shook his head. "It was Miss Penney's idea. I'm the arm's-length type, myself."

"I don't like it."

Joe surveyed him coolly. "Then tell her about it. I've got enough troubles of my own without adopting yours. I've no designs on your girl, Rittnauer. But you should know her by this time."

Greg glared for a moment, and then his better nature took over. "Yes," he admitted, "I should. I'm sorry." He shook his head. "Why should she want to torture me? What pleasure does she get out of that?"

"I don't know," Joe lied. "Some women are like that."

She was coming back to the table now. Joe watched her, and as his eyes swept past the various tables, they paused at one. A man sat there, facing Joe, a man who waved as he caught Joe's glance.

It was the man who'd sat next to him the night before—Carruthers.

Joe waved back. Rita, following the direction of his gaze, said, "Why, that's Mr. Carruthers."

"Know him?" Joe asked.

The fear was in her eyes again. "He works with us, Joe. Do you think he might be . . . watching me?"

Joe didn't have time to answer, for Alice was there now. As he and Greg rose, she said, "It's all fixed. We're to go right over there." She paused. "He guessed where we were. He described the place exactly. What do you think of

that, Greg? Try to explain *that* away."

Rita answered for him. "One of our members is sitting just three tables away. That might have had something to do with it."

Alice's smile wasn't completely sincere. "Skeptics, all of you, aren't you?" she said. "Well, Enrico will cure that. Let's go."

Joe looked at Rita and said, "How about it, Red? The decision's yours, as far as I'm concerned."

"I won't spoil the party," she answered. "Let's go."

They took both cars. In the coupe, Rita was quiet.

"Stop simmering," Joe told her, "and boil over."

"Boil?" She looked up at him in the dim glow from the instrument board. "Oh, I'm not angry, any more. You explained about that close dancing. Not that it's any of my business."

"Something's wrong," Joe insisted.

"I'm frightened," she said simply. "I'm afraid of Calerno. Seeing Carruthers at that place, and then going to this . . . spectacle. . . ."

"You've worked with the man for some time now, haven't you? How come you weren't frightened before this?"

"Nobody was murdered before this." She put a hand on Joe's arm. "Wait until you see that chair he uses for those trances of his. It's pain, you see—it's pain that puts him into the state where things are revealed to him. It'll turn your stomach, that chair."

"That's for the Inner Coterie only? I mean, this mystic stuff?"

She nodded. "For those who have achieved the true faith. And you've got to be wealthy in this cult to achieve the true faith and be admitted to the Inner Coterie."

"Alice belongs?"

"Miss Penney has been invited to join. She hasn't accepted yet."

Joe said, "She's probably getting a hell of a kick out of it. She's probably laughing at him all along."

"He's nobody to laugh at," Rita said. "And particularly now, since he's beginning to believe in the stuff himself."

THEY pulled up in front of the temple soon. The convertible was already there. Rittnauer, Alice, and Calerno were standing on the front steps. The Master's robe was maroon tonight, edged in white cording.

Calerno was saying, "Conditions might not be favorable, with a skeptical person like Mr. Welkin present, you understand, Alice, but I shall do what I can."

Joe said, "I'll wait out here, if I'm going to be in the way."

Rita said quickly, "Enrico can deliver, under any conditions."

Calerno smiled at her. "Thank you. I'll be glad to try—for your friend."

They went through the dim auditorium and around the hallway that skirted the stage, a hallway that afforded access to two rooms of equal size at its end. Both rooms were lighted, both plain. One seemed to be a receptacle for additional chairs and the appurtenances of the stage.

The other held seven or eight chairs in a semi-circular grouping, with a massive oak chair in the open end, turned to face the others.

There were clamps on the arms of this chair, firmly fastened to the heavy wood. There were clamps near the bottom of the chair, and a single, metal, head-sized clamp atop its high back.

Calerno said, "Who will volunteer to adjust the clamps? Mr. Welkin?"

Joe said, "I'm not sure I understand their purpose. Are they designed to keep you in the chair?"

"They're designed," Calerno said, "to inflict pain. If anyone among you would care to try it first?" He was looking at Rittnauer's bandaged hand as he said this.

Rittnauer said nothing.

Joe said, "If it's going to be painful, I'd rather somebody else tightened the clamps."

"I'd be glad to help," Rittnauer said.

"I'm sure you would," Calerno said. He smiled. "Very well. You should have the strength to tighten them securely. If the rest of you will please be seated?"

Calerno seated himself in the large oak chair. Around the room the lighting grew dimmer until they were in a semi-darkness. But it wasn't too dark for Joe to see that Rittnauer was bearing down hard on the clamps.

Calerno said nothing. He stared straight ahead, his mouth working, but he uttered no cry of pain. His face was a mask as Rittnauer tightened the final clamp.

To the right of Joe, Alice Penney's eyes were bright, and she was smiling. To Joe's left, Rita was looking at the floor, her face pale.

The lights grew even dimmer as Rittnauer took his seat. They were shadows now, all of them, excepting Calerno. Through some trick of lighting he seemed bathed in a mysterious glow.

There was only the sound of breathing in the room. The Master's eyes were closed. His mouth was closed too, as the first whispered words came forth.

Joe had expected ventriloquism; he knew this wasn't it. For Calerno's lips didn't move. Calerno's lips were pressed tightly together. He seemed a corpse, sitting so rigidly in that mammoth, murderous chair. But the whispered voice seemed to be his.

Joe heard the word "Japs" and then, "... this face over mine, this detective's face is bad. No belief, no humility ... to warn the girl, came to warn the girl, but failed, failed. ... Tell her of her enemies, Mr. Calerno, for you know them. You know what I know now. Tell her of the plan. She is so beautiful, so beautiful. Tell her what we know, you and I, Mr.

Calerno. She must be on guard. . . ."

There was silence, then. Calerno's body was still rigid, eyes closed, mouth tight with pain. Next to Joe, Alice Penney was leaning forward, just a shadow in the gloom.

Calerno's eyes opened. He was whimpering. Joe heard, "It's too much, these clamps. . . . Loosen the clamps. . . ."

Greg Rittnauer didn't move. Alice Penney didn't change position. Rita said, "Joe, for heavens' sake. . . ."

But Joe was already halfway to the chair. He loosened the head clamp first, and then the wrists. As he was unscrewing the anklets, Calerno said, "Anything come? Did I contact him?"

Alice Penney answered him. "You did, Enrico. It was magnificent."

The Master was free to move now, but he stayed in the chair, rubbing his forehead, the back of his neck. He was breathing heavily.

From the hallway, somebody said, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything." It was Carruthers.

Rita gripped Joe's arm and whispered, "Can't we go?"

Joe shook his head.

Calerno said, "I'll be with you in a little while, Ned," and turned his back on the man.

Carruther's brown eyes regarded that back speculatively, and then swung over to meet Joe's gaze. "You're doing all right for a newcomer, Mr. Wilkin," he said.

"I've been very lucky," Joe agreed. His glance held Carruthers, until Carruthers turned to go back down the hallway.

Rittnauer had been strangely silent. Joe thought there was a possibility Calerno's display had impressed him. He wondered about Carruthers, remembering how he'd been fooled last night. The man looked like the retired farmer Joe had tried to emulate. And finally, he wondered about



Rita. How sincere was she with him? She was standing now, looking down at him. "Couldn't we go out and get some air?"

Calerno said, "I'll want to talk to you, Rita."

She shook her head. "I'm through, Enrico. I'm quitting, now."

Calerno's cold blue eyes looked troubled. He said, "We'll talk about that, too."

Greg Rittnauer said, "Let's go, Alice. You've had a rough day. You should be in bed."

She wasn't listening. She was watching Calerno, as though expecting some sign from him. He said, "Mr. Rittnauer speaks the truth. You should rest, Alice, after this day."

Then he turned and left the room. Alice Penny was still watching him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Psychology for Murder*

JOE'S trip this evening was a replica of that he'd taken the night before, with the exception of the bench interlude. On the way back from the Penney home, he and Rita stopped at a drive-in. He ordered a barbecued beef sandwich. Rita had a cup of coffee.

"You haven't said a word since we left the temple," Joe said. "Thinking about the hundred you'll miss? Or aren't you really quitting?"

"I'm quitting," she said quietly. "I won't make that kind of money in another job, but I have to live with my conscience."

"It's an expensive luxury, a conscience," Joe agreed. "It's been a rough day, hasn't it?"

"Rotten," she said, and then managed a smile. "With a few bright spots here and there. Do you like that Alice Penney?"

"She gives me the creeps," Joe said. "I'd as soon be tied up with a cobra."

"Honest, Joe?"

"Scout's honor. What's that Carruthers do in the outfit?"

"Sort of a detective, I guess. He checks on the newcomers, to see that they're bona fide. Sort of a muscle man."

"How about that message tonight? I was watching Calerno's lips, and they weren't moving."

"I don't know, Joe," she said, and her voice was earnest. "You don't think that maybe he has some power, that it was really. . ."

"You're tired, Red," Joe said. "You're not thinking straight."

"Maybe," she said.

The girl brought their tray and hooked it on the door. Joe ate in silence, while Rita sipped her coffee. He was thinking, hard.

Rita asked, "All those thoughts getting you anywhere?"

"Not yet," Joe said, and sighed. "There must be some more sensible way of making a living, don't you think?"

"I'll find out tomorrow," she answered. "I hope I'll be able to sleep."

"I know I will," Joe said.

He didn't fall asleep right away, though. The hunch he'd had kept haunting him, and he tossed for some time. Tomorrow, he'd go out to Westwood and do some checking.

\* \* \*

He forgot to set the alarm; it was nearly ten o'clock and his bedroom was flooded with sunlight when he awakened.

He shaved and showered quickly, and went right down to Carter Penny's office.

There, he related the events of the evening before.

Penny's plain face was grim this morning, and his eyes indicated his lack of rest. He said wearily, "I keep thinking about that man who died. I keep wondering—" He broke off abruptly, rose, and

went to the window. He asked, "Have you any ideas on—on what happened?"

"Just ideas," Joe said. "Nothing more."

Penney didn't pursue the topic further. He said, "The police have been watching the house. I'm sure of it. That's for protection, I suppose." He turned now, and his face showed no emotion. "You've been very efficient, Mr. Welkin. Stay with it." He paused. "I'm relying on you to keep my daughter out of trouble."

Joe didn't miss the significance of the last sentence. He rose, and said, "I'll do all I can, Mr. Penney. I'll do all I legally can."

Penney was again staring out the window when Joe left.

He drove out to Westwod. There was a Chrysler Windsor sedan that seemed to be following him, but it never came close enough for him to distinguish the driver.

It took a bit of digging, out at Westwood, but he finally got what information was available.

The Chrysler Windsor was parked behind him when he returned to his car. Carruthers stood next to the open front door.

"A dick," Carruthers said. "You almost fooled me, Welkin, that first night. I thought I could see corn coming out of your ears."

Joe grinned. "There might be, at that. I only left Iowa about twenty years ago. What's on your mind?"

"The boss wants to see you."

"Now?"

"Some time today. He told me about it last night, but I thought I'd follow you around for a while this morning, just to see what you're up to."

Joe said, "That Ricci's Rendezvous is Calerno's spot, isn't it? I never realized until this morning that Ricci probably stood for Enrico."

"That's one of his spots," Carruthers admitted. "That's the game he should

have stuck to. I wish he'd never got into this hoodoo pitch." The brown eyes were speculative. "What'd you find out here?"

"Just something to bolster a hunch. How's your broken leg?"

Carruthers smiled. "Healed. You sure fell for that one, didn't you? Think I could make a go as an actor? You know, character parts?"

"It would depend upon the character," Joe answered. "I think I'll run down and see Calerno now."

Carruthers nodded. "I'll follow you."

**D**RIVING west on Wilshire, Joe reflected that there were a lot of actors in this drama, most of them bad.

The door to the temple was open this morning, as Joe and Carruthers went in together. The auditorium was deserted, but Carruthers led the way through the hall that terminated in the twin rooms at the rear.

Calerno sat in the huge chair, the same chair he had occupied last night. But he wasn't in a trance today.

Enrico Calerno was dead.

The top of his head was battered; rivulets of blood were drying on his face. Joe turned to look at Carruthers.

Carruthers was pale, and his brown eyes seemed glued to the grim figure in the chair.

Joe said, "Call the police. Then phone L.A. and tell Chopko about it."

Carruthers shook his head. "Not me. I'm getting out. I warned the boss last night he was getting out of his field. I don't want no part of murder."

"You'd be playing it dumb, running now, Carruthers. I'd have to tell Chopko about it, and it would look bad if you weren't here. Go and phone." Joe's voice was sharp.

Carruthers eyed him thoughtfully, his face still pale. Finally he turned and went back down the hall.

Joe examined the room, touching noth-

ing, trying to miss nothing. It was exactly as it had been left last night. There was no sign of a weapon. He wondered if Carruthers was phoning, or if he had run away.

The sound of a siren a few minutes later was his answer. Two uniformed men came into the room with Carruthers a few seconds after that.

Carruthers said, "Chopko's on his way. I caught him at headquarters."

One of the officers went out into the auditorium with Carruthers and Joe, the other stayed with the body.

The officer was still questioning both of them when Chopko arrived. There was a local detective with him.

The local man went back to the room; Chopko took Joe over out of earshot. "Where's the redhead?" he asked.

"Miss Boyd?"

Chopko nodded, watching Joe closely. "She quit last night. She's probably out looking for a job."

"How about this Carruthers. He was over at that spot last night, that Ricci's Rendezvous, wasn't he?"

Joe nodded, looking surprised.

"Had a man over there," Chopko said. "He saw you come in with the redhead and join the others. What the hell kind of game you playing, Welkin?"

"No game. You know who I'm working for."

"And this Carruthers?"

"One of Calerno's boys. That's all I know about him."

"I suppose," Chopko said evenly, "you didn't know that he was hanging around George Platt's rooming house yesterday afternoon. Platt went right from that rooming house to Penney's. If we figure a half-hour for the poison to finish him, that means he was probably poisoned right there, at his rooming house. Today, you and Carruthers find a body. Carruthers tails you out to Westwood and talks to you out there. What were you

doing out in Westwood, anyway?"

"Checking some background," Joe told him. "Playing a hunch."

"Make some sense," Chopko said. "Name some names."

"I haven't enough evidence for that."

Chopko said heavily, "If I was going to guess, it would be between you and Carruthers, understand? With that redhead mixed in somewhere."

"You'd be guessing wrong, I think," Joe said. "Carruthers was Calerno's boy; he did his checking for him. He was probably checking on Platt yesterday."

"Sure, sure. And when he found out Platt was going to squeak, he slipped him the micky. The technical boys went over that room after we left. There'd been somebody drinking; there were the marks of two glasses on that bureau."

Joe said nothing.

Chopko said, "And you might've been waiting up there, at the other end, to see that he didn't make it. You weren't waiting for the girl to show in the morning, why not?"

"She never left the house before noon. She usually slept most of the morning." Joe shook his head. "Sergeant, I've been in business in this town for a long time, and before that I was on the force. You don't think I'd get mixed up in a mess as nasty as this, not on the wrong side of the fence?"

"I'm trying not to," Chopko said. "What's this hunch you got?"

**J**OE TOLD him what he'd learned at Westwood. He said, "Let me go up against him. He's got no reason to admit anything to the law. But I might scare him enough so he'd make a play. You could be waiting at the door."

Chopko frowned doubtfully.

"It's not far," Joe argued, "and you could run Carruthers in. They could be working him over, a little. He might be the clincher."

"Okay," Chopko agreed. "We'll take your car."

He said no more on the trip down to Ocean Avenue. Joe parked as close to the Alcazar as he could get.

In the lobby Chopko showed his badge to the desk clerk and asked for the house detective.

The house man was fat and slow and well past middle age. He listened to their story without any apparent emotion. When they'd finished he said, "There's only the one door. This private eye could go up now, and we'd trail along a bit later. You can hear right through those doors. I know."

The clerk said, "There won't be any trouble, will there, Arnold? Everything will be done quietly?"

The house man nodded and then gestured to Joe.

Joe went up in the elevator to the sixth floor and waited there in the hallway for a few seconds until the elevator was well on its way down again.

Then he went to the door of 620 and knocked.

There was no answer for nearly half a minute. Then, from the other side of the door, Greg Rittnauer said, "Who's there?"

"It's Joe Welkin, Rittnauer. I'd like to talk to you."

Another silence. Then, "Just a minute. I haven't any clothes on."

Joe felt for his .38 in its shoulder holster. He took it out and put it in his jacket pocket. About a minute after that the door opened. From down the hallway, Joe heard the elevator stop.

Greg Rittnauer was wearing shoes, socks, shirt, and trousers. His gaze seemed to be probing Joe's, trying to find some answers.

Joe said, "Was it clothes you had to put on, or the bandage, Rittnauer?"

Rittnauer didn't answer right away. He closed the door behind Joe and gestured toward a chair near the windows.

When Joe was seated, Rittnauer asked, "What did you mean about the bandage?"

"I was watching you tighten those clamps last night," Joe said. "You didn't favor your right hand nearly enough for a boy who was supposed to be burned as badly as you were."

"Didn't I?" Rittnauer's chair was facing Joe's, and he was sitting forward, almost on its edge.

Joe watched him carefully. "You know, the public has a tendency to underrate halfbacks. From an academic standpoint, that is. A common mistake. I was out to Westwood this morning, out to the university. You were a psychology major, weren't you, Rittnauer? You had some fine grades, too."

"Good enough, I guess. What else is on your mind?"

"That hand of yours, for one thing. The way I figure it, you met Alice at the university, and she had the kind of money you'd like to share, under our state laws. You knew just about what *she* wanted, too. A worm. A fly she could pull the wings from. You arranged that little demonstration with Calerno, didn't you? You suggested to her that Ricci's Rendezvous had an interesting floor show. And, come to think of it, you were the one

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who suggested last night that Calerno contact George Platt."

"Go on."

"But Calerno is beginning to get ideas of his own. So when he goes into the pseudo-trance, he talks of the 'plan' and her 'enemies' and what he and Platt both knew. That was for you. That was warning you to lay off the girl, that Calerno wanted her. You went back there last night. *It was you who stabbed him.*"

Joe saw the flicker of surprise in Rittnauer's eyes at the word *stabbed*. He knew then.

"Calerno's been stabbed?" Rittnauer said. "He's—"

"He's dead," Joe said quietly. "And you killed him. Just like you poisoned Platt when he was going to tell Alice about you. Why was he going to squawk? His conscience bother him?"

"It's quite a story," Rittnauer said finally. "Only, it happens that none of it's true."

"Part of it's true," Joe replied. "Because Carruthers saw you leave the rooming house. He saw Platt leave, and followed Platt. Carruthers only wants half."

Rittnauer was plainly nervous now. He rose suddenly, to stand near the window. "Half?"

"Half of the ten grand you're paying us to shut up."

"Oh," Rittnauer said. "So that's the deal. And what in hell makes you think I'd pay, if I had it, for a cock-and-bull story like that?"

"We can wait," Joe said, "until you marry the girl. We could take your note."

"You could go to hell, too," Rittnauer said.

Joe shrugged. "So could you. The hard way. Why not take the bandage off? Why not let me take a look at that hand?"

"Gladly," Rittnauer said, and the hand came up from his side.

Only it came up clenched, and moving with the speed of light, Joe saw it whistling toward his jaw and tried to twist his head. Too late.

He went over with the chair, bells ringing in his brain.

He was reaching dazedly for his .38 as he went over, but Greg Rittnauer was faster. He was standing over him now, a service automatic in his hand.

From the doorway, Chopko said, "Hold it, Rittnauer."

Rittnauer had gone through a bad session, and he was keyed way beyond sanity. He sent a shot hurtling toward the door—and Chopko's gun began to bark.

*Everything will be done quietly*, Joe thought.

IN HIS small office Chopko said, "Well, I guess that'll cover it, just about." He had Joe's statement in his hand. "Rittnauer's starting to break. We've got almost enough to take him to court already."

Joe said nothing, looking at the floor, rubbing his jaw.

Chopko sighed and lighted a cigar. "That was quite a chair Calerno had. Loud speaker hidden in the back and record player in the other room wired to it. Remote-control switch. He probably made the record that afternoon. Those clamps were limited by a spring built right into them, only would compress so much." He shook his head. "This is the damndest town for cults."

Joe agreed to that. "How about Miss Boyd?" he asked. "She's as much on the up-and-up as anybody is these days. You won't be—"

"All right, all right." Chopko shook his head again. "Love." Then he looked thoughtful. "Say, you think there's any chance she might have a friend?"

"I'll ask her," Joe promised. "I'm going to keep phoning until I get her, and I'll ask her."

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## JOSEPH W. QUINN

(Continued from page 6)

their first in London, both men retired early.

How long he had been sleeping before it happened Captain Morgan had no way of telling. He was suddenly wide awake and terrified beyond anything that he'd ever known on the field of battle. At first he was aware only of the flapping of wings close to his face and of a strange coldness that had seized his body.

Then he began to see the thing clearly—the figure of a huge bird, black as a raven, its wings flapping madly, its eyes two balls of red fire.

The eerie bird pressed its attack, nipping with its fearsome beak at his face, arms and neck.

Captain Morgan, recovered from the paralysis of initial shock, flailed at the bird with his arms. But the thing did not retreat. Nor was he conscious of ever touching it although his flailing arms were not missing their target.

Desperate, Morgan flung himself out of bed and beat at the creature with the pillow on which he'd been sleeping. Gradually, the bird retreated before his onslaught. Finally, it settled on the sofa.

Aware that at last he had the thing cowed and cornered, Morgan paused to take firm hold on the pillow before administering the knockout blows. But even as he did so the flapping wings grew still, the bird seemed to cringe in terror, and then it melted away into nothingness.

Captain Morgan got a lamp going and then examined every nook and cranny of the room. He found nothing.

The next morning he said nothing. But on the following evening he persuaded his friend to swap rooms with him. The next morning his friend appeared pale and shaken and told a weird story of a huge black bird with fiery red eyes that had attacked him during the night.

## THE TAKERS OF THE HEADS

(Continued from page 31)

breathe. He saw a dog come along the walk and pause at the broken figure beside the hydrant. The dog sniffed then ran.

"Jim! Jim, Jim!" A voice was calling frantically. He turned. Carol was running toward him from across the street. "Are you all right? I followed you here last night. I called the police, but they said wait. They wanted to wait and watch, and I was so afraid that— Are you all right?"

He brushed his hand across his eyes. "Sleepy. Lost," he whispered. "Dogs. Cats. Funny things. Lots of brains. Eyes. Lots of—"

"Jim!" she screamed. He did not hear her. He fell and rolled down the steps into the snow.

**T**WO DAYS later in the hospital Carol tried to explain to him. "Once he ran an alcoholic cure place, and the police found someone who'd escaped from there when he tried to murder—"

"He? Who?" Jim asked uneasily.

"The man who— Don't you remember?"

"Everybody keeps asking me that. Of course I remember. Pagan Micky is dead and Ward wants me to go down to Tony's Port and cover the story. I keep telling them I've got to hurry, and they don't believe me!"

For a long time she looked at him, then she reached out and touched his hand. "It's all right. Somebody else covered the story while you were ill. Don't worry, Jim, and don't try to remember," she whispered. "Just look ahead and everything will be all right."

"That's easy," Jim grinned. "Let's get the hell out of here. This story will bust the paper wide open. It ought to give me a bonus and a couple of days off—enough to get married on. . ."

THE END

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## DOROTHY DUNN

(Continued from page 39)

noticed that she was much thinner than he'd remembered her. She was alarmingly thin now. Her cheeks were more hollow than his had ever been.

"Margaret! You've been ill, darling. You've been ill all this time and I didn't know!"

Her smile was jerky.

"You'll never know how ill, Barry. But it doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is how much I love you. I came here tonight to make you understand that. It's very important that you do. It's very important that you go along with your painting and make me proud of you."

"You will be, darling," promised Barry, moving to put his arms around her. "You and all our kids will be proud of me some day! I'm going to work like a horse for you, Margaret."

She fended him off gently with her hands.

"For yourself, Barry. You've got to work for yourself. Can you think of it that way?"

She stood up and drew her purse under her arm.

"I'm going now," she said. "I just wanted to see you once more."

"Once more? Look, Margaret, I'm sorry if I've hurt you by staying away so long, but, believe me, I couldn't help it. I wouldn't blame you if you've met someone else, but I couldn't help my absence. There are so many things you don't know, couldn't understand."

Her smile was strangely remote, mysterious.

"Don't know? Barry, there's nothing I don't know. And perhaps I halfway understand, knowing you so well. That doesn't matter. It's the depth of my own love for you that I had to tell you about. The police came today, Barry. I'm sure



## BEAUTIFUL BUT DEAD

they'll come again. They traced me through the gun. I didn't know they could find out so much about a gun, Barry. But it doesn't matter. That's what I wanted to tell you. It doesn't matter. I'm glad!"

She left quickly, slamming the door behind her.

He sat there, stunned, as though his soul had just received a slap in the face.

Somebody else! He hadn't killed Sonia. He'd been grateful to somebody else for that. Would always be grateful. But the somebody else was Margaret.

The plaster figurine on the mantel, the figurine he'd always thought so white and cold, seemed to burst into a rosy glow as he looked at it.

He walked over and picked it up, half expecting its new warmth to burn his hand. But it was still cold to the touch, as cold as the dead Sonia.

Then the phone started ringing, and he jumped. The little figure slipped out of his hand and broke when it hit the hearth. He knelt down, ignoring the phone. He was glad it hadn't shattered. It was in three pieces, all the breaks nice and clean. He felt sure he could mend it. It would never be as good as new, but he could get it together again at least. Do the best he could.

He placed the pieces of the statue in a drawer with his shirts. By the time he passed the phone again, it had stopped ringing. It wasn't important. He knew he'd get to the police before they got to him.

He'd go after Margaret first, just in case she had any silly ideas about the easy way out. Then he'd take care of the rest of it with the police. She hadn't given him back to himself for nothing. The old Barry MacLane had never been a coward. They'd face it, somehow. Together.

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**HENRY HASSE**

(Continued from page 57)

I thought that would end it. I thought they'd let me go, but Winter kept after me. "Connor, you say you came back to the house this morning for some clothes. I'd like to hear about that."

I shrugged. "I intended moving out, that's all. Sure, I was surprised to see a cop staked out there; it's the first I knew anything had happened. He told me my wife was dead. I came right down to the mortuary with him."

"Those were my orders," Winter nodded. "We weren't quite sure of you yet, and I wanted to watch your reaction." He leaned forward. "When I mentioned the .45, you seemed surprised. Why? Didn't you know it was a gun that did it? How did you think it happened?"

"I don't know! I never thought she'd do it. Especially with a gun. Poison, sleeping tablets—that's usually a woman's way, isn't it?"

"It is indeed, Connor. That's why I followed a hunch. There was only one set of prints on that gun. We took your wife's prints and compared them. They don't match. Conclusion: it couldn't have been suicide."

Well, Ruth, I just couldn't believe it. And when a man came in from the lab, and reported that the prints matched up with mine, I knew they had me. They had me for a murder I didn't really commit. Naturally my prints were all over the gun. But where were yours? You handled it last!

I guess you really hated me, Ruth.

Well, they knew they had me, but they began throwing more questions anyway. "You've admitted you quarreled! Is that why you killed her, because of this other woman?"

"I tell you it was suicide! Sure, it was partly my fault she did it. I feel bad!"

Well, they kept at me and kept at me, and it got pretty bad. But they didn't break

me down. Finally Winter said, "Connor, you may as well confess. We've got the prints, but we've got another clincher, too. Nine out of ten times a suicide will leave a note. Especially women. We looked for a note, and we found one, all right. Only it wasn't a suicide note."

Then they showed me the note, Ruth, that they found in your bureau drawer.

It was clever, Ruth. I admit that. Dating it a month back. Saying you were afraid of me, that I had threatened your life several times, and if anything like this should happen . . . Ruth, how could you lie like that? How could you do that to me? But I remember the funny look in your eyes, and I guess you really meant it when you said I'd never have Elise. . .

Ruth, I've finally figured it all out. The part about the prints, I mean. It was very simple after all. I remember you were wearing that thin nightgown thing. You must have handled the gun very carefully, using the lower hem of the nightgown. I guess that's how you did it.

Anyway, it doesn't matter now. They've put me in here. Winter has all the evidence he needs, but I think he's still determined to get that confession.

Ruth, I guess I'm afraid of him.

I just thought I'd write it all down and let you know, about the sleeping pills and the rest of it. Winter must never know, but it's all right if I tell you, isn't it? Isn't it? You always understood about these things. I'll have to hurry now. I have my tie and belt. I've tested them, and they're strong enough. The window in here is pretty high. If I can just get the belt around the middle bar, I think that'll do fine.

I can't help thinking about Winter; he's so sure he's going to get that confession! It'll be a good joke on him, won't it? Well, so long, Ruth, I'll be seeing you. As ever,  
Jim.

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## WILLIAM L. DAY

(Continued from page 70)

pounding, and she pulled the master switch in the fuse box. That was why everything went black for Mrs. Munson. And as the power went off, the hum in the black cabinet stopped, too.

Dr. Mueller had neglected to establish for himself an auxiliary power supply. He ran out of the room, started down the stairs to grope his way to the basement to find the fuse box. On the way down, he collided with Mrs. Prince coming up. She was armed with a baseball bat.

She beat him mercilessly until she remembered her first obligation was to get upstairs and save Mrs. Munson. By the time Mrs. Prince reached the laboratory, Mrs. Munson was sitting on the floor, rubbing her neck. "I'm all right," she called out. "Have you called the police yet?"

"No, I was in too much of a hurry, but—"

"Go call them at once!"

"I won't need to. I told the Joneses next door if the lights went out to call the police."

Mrs. Munson groaned. "And if the lights hadn't gone out, what would they have thought?"

There was a noise at the front door. It was the police.

"You'd better let them in. I locked the door."

There was a crash as the door broke in. They could hear a struggle in the lower hall, and then footsteps pounding up the stairs. The bulk of a policeman loomed in the door. His flashlight swept the room, its beam picking out the figures of the two old women, and then turning on the black cabinet to illuminate the dead head of Fritz Kirstein.

The head had already begun to decompose, and the odor of Dachau and Buchenwald swept through the room.

THE END

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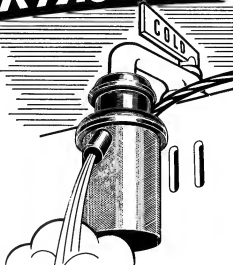
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